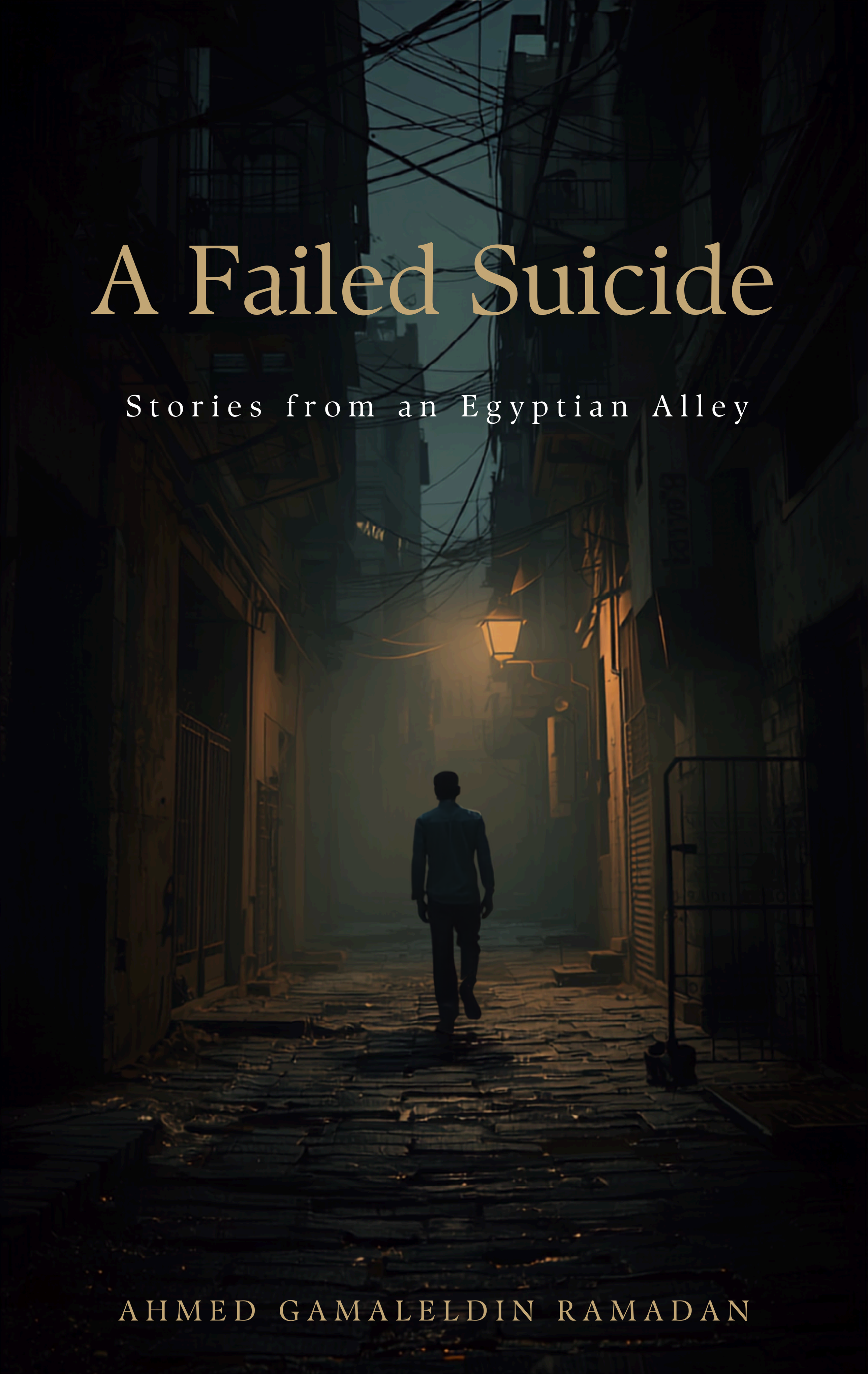
A Failed Suicide

Stories from an Egyptian Alley



AHMED GAMALELDIN RAMADAN

These dark, psychological stories explore guilt, fear, hypocrisy, grief, and the fragile line between innocence and complicity. Blending literary fiction with suspense, Ahmed Gamaleldin Ramadan offers a haunting portrait of ordinary people trapped inside extraordinary moral dilemmas.

*(Riad Elhosani - Literary critic***)**

Introduction

Some neighborhoods exist only on maps.

Others exist in memory.

The alley you are about to enter belongs to the second kind.

Its people are ordinary. They worry about work, struggle to pay their bills, celebrate weddings, mourn their dead, gossip with their neighbors, and carry on with lives that seem too small to matter. Yet behind these familiar routines lie fear, ambition, hypocrisy, love, cruelty, and the quiet compromises that shape entire societies.

These stories are not about heroes.

Nor are they about villains in the traditional sense.

They are about people caught in moments when the ordinary suddenly reveals something extraordinary—when a casual conversation exposes corruption, when a harmless habit becomes a moral dilemma, when justice and injustice quietly exchange places.

Although the stories unfold in an Egyptian alley, they are not confined to one country or one culture. The alley becomes a small world where power, poverty, hope, fear, and human weakness meet. What happens there may feel unfamiliar in its details, yet deeply familiar in its emotions.

Some stories end with irony.

Others end with silence.

A few end with questions that remain unanswered long after the final page.

If these stories have a single purpose, it is not to judge their characters, but to invite readers to look more closely at the fragile line separating innocence from guilt, truth from illusion, and justice from power.

Welcome to the alley.

The Criminal

I got off work late that evening. Before heading into the alley where I lived, I stopped to buy a few groceries. As I approached the entrance, I was surprised to find a police truck blocking the way. Several uniformed officers had spread out across the entrance, keeping the residents from getting any closer.

Beyond the human barricade, a crowd had already gathered. Faces were tense with curiosity and unease, every eye fixed on whatever was unfolding inside. I tried to explain that I lived in the alley, but the officers turned me back with firm, practiced indifference.

“It won't take more than a few minutes,” one of them said.

There was nothing to do but squeeze into the crowd and wait. It wasn't the first time. Every now and then, the police descended on our alley to arrest someone. The operation rarely lasted long.

Curiosity got the better of me. I had to know who they had come for this time. Strangely enough, none of us seemed to know the victim—or rather, the criminal—they were after. The young conscripts guarding the entrance were no more informed than we were. Even after a few of the neighbors slipped them cigarettes and tried to chat them up, they couldn't squeeze a single useful detail out of them.

It had to be Zaher El-Sayyab.

He had inherited his father's drug business, but none of his father's caution or intelligence. The old man had run his operation for years without ever being caught. Everyone knew exactly what he did, yet the police had never managed to gather enough evidence to touch him.

Zaher was different. Too proud. Too reckless. Unlike his father, who preferred the shadows, Zaher flaunted his influence after taking control of the neighborhood. He picked public fights, made powerful enemies, and behaved as though he were untouchable.

Surely someone had finally informed on him. I hoped they had. The alley would be a cleaner place without him and his gang.

Still...

It didn't seem likely.

For all his arrogance, Zaher wasn't foolish enough to keep drugs in his apartment in the alley or even in the large fabric store he used as a respectable front. I knew for a fact he stored everything in warehouses far from the neighborhood and distributed it well away from his home.

Besides...

He had been out of town for three days.

My certainty dissolved into confusion. Then who was it?

Someone whispered a name through the crowd.

Adel Yousry.

Had they come for Adel?

I have to admit; the thought gave me a certain satisfaction.

Adel owned the electrical appliances shop at the far end of the alley. He had started out buying stolen appliances and selling them for a tidy profit. Before long, he was dealing in just about anything—as long as it was stolen. Gold. Watches. Mobile phones. Cosmetics. If its origin was questionable, Adel would find a buyer.

His reputation had been built on his friendship with Azmi, the most notorious burglar in the neighborhood. He bought everything Azmi managed to steal during his nightly escapades. In time, he expanded his network, forging ties with every pickpocket, housebreaker, and thief worth mentioning. You'd be hard-pressed to find a criminal in our district who didn't know Adel.

Oddly enough, he had never moved away. His little shop remained exactly as it had always been, modest and unremarkable, as though nothing had changed. His old house, however, had been transformed into something people spoke about with envy. Those fortunate enough to step inside returned with stories of marble floors, expensive furniture, and chandeliers that looked wildly out of place in our crumbling alley.

His children no longer attended the shabby public school nearby. They had been transferred to one of the city's finest private schools. People also said he never trusted banks. Every pound he owned was hidden somewhere inside that house.

I stood on tiptoe, trying to catch a glimpse of his shop.

Its doors were open.

A handful of policemen stood farther down the alley, nowhere near it.

Impossible.

It couldn't be him.

A moment later, Adel himself stepped outside, dragged a chair onto the sidewalk, and sat down as calmly as if he were waiting for customers instead of watching a police raid.

I shook my head.

Another disappointment

I searched my memory again, turning over every dark page in the alley's history. Then another name surfaced.

I know it's foolish to tempt fate with *what-ifs*...

But if it were Azmi... I'd throw a celebration myself.

I doubt I was the only one. If there was one thing the people of our alley had ever agreed on, it was their hatred of Azmi and their desperate wish to be rid of him.

His crimes defied classification. He was a convicted felon who drifted in and out of prison with astonishing ease. The last time he'd been locked up, he'd served barely two months. We had foolishly believed we were finally free of him. Some neighbors even handed out sweets to celebrate.

Our relief didn't last. The elections were just around the corner. A few days before the vote, he was released. The government-backed candidate he openly supported won by a comfortable margin. The opposing candidate disappeared not long afterward. No one asked questions.

Azmi possessed a frightening versatility. A burglar. A thug. A con artist. A drug dealer. A murderer.

He was a walking encyclopedia of crime.

He had begun by breaking into houses. Later, when drugs dulled both his nerves and his courage, he sought easier prey. He bought a motorcycle and, together with one of his accomplices, began snatching handbags—and sometimes jewelry—from unsuspecting women.

Eventually, he graduated to firearms. Night after night, he roamed the streets looking for solitary victims, threatening them at gunpoint before relieving them of everything valuable they carried. Whenever money ran short, he dealt drugs. Whenever someone offered enough cash, he became their hired muscle.

Soon he discovered that intimidation itself could be profitable. Every shopkeeper in the neighborhood paid him a monthly "protection fee."

So did many homeowners

Protection...

From him.

He had gathered around him a gang of men every bit as vicious as he was. No one dared challenge them. He handled a knife with the confidence of a skilled surgeon. Anyone reckless enough to oppose him carried the reminder for life—a scar across the face, the neck, or the chest.

And every now and then... A murder. Just enough to remind everyone who ruled the alley.

I found myself silently praying that the current enormous police operation was meant for him. Surely, they hadn't come with so many officers unless they expected trouble.

The thought comforted me—

for only a moment.

Then, without warning...

Azmi stepped into the crowd and stopped barely a pace behind me.

The sight of Azmi standing behind me wiped every other thought from my mind. For a few moments, I couldn't think at all. When my thoughts finally returned, they wandered through the alley once again, searching for another possibility.

Could they be after Amin, the owner of the neighborhood's only bakery? Everyone knew he siphoned off subsidized flour and sold it on the black market in broad daylight.

Or perhaps Mohsen, the mechanic. More than one customer had accused him of replacing genuine spare parts with cheap knockoffs while pretending to repair their cars.

Maybe it was Zizi, who had turned her house into a secret brothel. Her late-night visitors had become impossible to ignore.

Or Abbas, the coffeehouse owner. Every evening he locked his doors from the inside, transforming the place into a hash den until dawn.

I felt dizzy.

The shopping bags had grown painfully heavy in my hands.

Damn it.

Why was I exhausting myself trying to guess the name? Whoever it was, justice had finally reached someone. By the end of the day, our alley would be rid of one of its worst inhabitants. That alone should have been enough.

True, I had been disappointed that Azmi wasn't the one.

But every dog has its day.

Perhaps fate had chosen someone even worse

Silence settled over the crowd. Heavy. Uneasy.

Then movement rippled through the alley. The officers stationed farther inside immediately straightened.

A door opened.

Several policemen emerged from one of the houses. Between them, they dragged a man whose face we couldn't yet see. The way they gripped him—with both arms pinned behind his back—made him look unimaginably dangerous.

A few seconds later, two more men were brought out in exactly the same fashion.

Three arrests.

I had hoped for one criminal.

Instead, they had caught three.

An unexpected wave of satisfaction washed over me.

At last.

As they drew closer, the crowd leaned forward almost as one. Faces strained. Eyes narrowed. Everyone wanted the first clear look.

Then the first prisoner's face came into view. The curiosity around me dissolved into stunned silence. Silence became disbelief. Disbelief turned into outrage.

It was Mahmoud.

There had to be some mistake.

Mahmoud, the son of Hussein, the electricity company employee. One of the very few people in the alley whose honesty no one had ever questioned. A quiet government worker who had raised his children with dignity despite a lifetime of financial hardship.

Whenever his name came up, people spoke of him with nothing but respect. Mahmoud was studying law at the university. A decent young man. Disciplined. Soft-spoken.

As far as anyone knew, he had never been involved in violence, crime, or even a reckless prank. He loved writing. Occasionally, his articles appeared in small independent newspapers, and he took part in university activities whenever he could

Then we saw Hussein stumble out of the house behind the officers, struggling desperately to reach his son. The policemen shoved him back.

Moments later, Mahmoud's mother followed. She was ill, barely able to stand, yet she forced herself outside, crying uncontrollably as she reached toward her only son.

No one listened.

Within seconds, the three young men were shoved into the back of the police truck.

The officers forced a path through the crowd.

The convoy pulled away.

Only days later did we learn the charges.

Mahmoud and his friends were accused of threatening public order. They had taken part in a demonstration at the university. Mahmoud had also written an article that, according to the authorities, contained "offensive statements."

His lawyer never told us whom those words had offended.

The police had simply waited until he and two fellow students happened to be gathered at his house before moving in.

Someone had informed on them.

One of the neighborhood informants.

There was always one.

Even now, whenever I remember that afternoon, the bitterness returns.

I can still see the police truck pushing its way through the crowd...

And standing behind it...

Azmi—the burglar, the thug, the murderer—watching Mahmoud disappear behind steel bars.

He slowly shook his head in sorrow, then sighed and declared with heartfelt conviction,

"Crime never pays."

Prepared

She had slept longer than usual.

The blanket was wrapped tightly around her face, while the pillow rested over her head in the familiar way she had adopted over the years. Only a small part of her frail body remained visible.

He stood beside the bed, debating whether to wake her for her daily injection. After a moment's hesitation, he decided to let her sleep for another five minutes. If she still hadn't woken by then, he would wake her himself.

He walked into the kitchen and prepared his customary morning coffee. Sipping it slowly, he settled in front of the television just in time for the morning news.

As always, the headlines sent his blood pressure climbing. He had sworn countless times to stop watching the news, yet every morning he found himself sitting before it once again. Old habits were stubborn companions.

When he finally glanced at the clock, the promised five minutes had somehow stretched into fifteen. He immediately got to his feet and returned to her room. She hadn't moved. She looked almost fused to the bed, as though she and the mattress had become a single silent shape. He remembered how she had spent most of the previous night coughing, unable to find a comfortable position or a moment's rest.

"Let her sleep a little longer," he thought. "Just a little."

This would be the last extension. After that, he would wake her before leaving to collect his pension.

He went into their bedroom. Ever since their children had married and left home, she had rarely slept there anymore. Instead, she preferred sleeping in their eldest son's old room. Before going to bed each night, she would straighten the framed photographs of their children on the bedside table until they faced her perfectly.

She always claimed their bedroom was too cold in winter. Its northern windows let in colder air than her weakened body could bear.

Years of illness had taken their toll. High blood pressure. Diabetes. Atherosclerosis. Only a month earlier, she had undergone major surgery, and although she was recovering, her body had grown noticeably thinner, her strength fading day by day.

Still...

She refused to surrender to rest. She insisted on running the household herself, no matter how often the doctors warned her against it. He knew the real reason she slept in that room. She missed the children. Especially now that the youngest had married only two months earlier, leaving the nest empty at last.

Their departure, coupled with her illnesses, had made her increasingly irritable. He remembered the argument they had had the day before.

Oddly enough...

He could no longer remember what it had been about.

The reason was always different.

The ending never was.

She would lose her temper...

Only to appear minutes later carrying him a glass of water, gently reminding him to take his blood-pressure medication.

He suffered from hypertension too.

But compared to hers...

His burden was a light one

Yesterday she had pushed herself far beyond her limits. She had invited all the children over for lunch and stubbornly insisted on supervising every detail herself, ignoring the doctor's repeated warnings. Whenever guests came, she became anxious over the smallest imperfections. Everything had to be spotless. Everything had to be perfect.

After the children left, the pain in her legs became unbearable. She could barely stand. He ended up cleaning the entire house himself. Although he had gone to bed long before she did, he knew she hadn't managed to fall asleep until shortly before dawn.

And yet...

No matter how late she slept, she was always the first one awake.

So why hadn't she risen today?

A dark thought slipped quietly into his mind.

He walked toward her bed again.

This time...

He noticed something.

He couldn't hear her breathing.

Normally, it filled the room.

Heavy.

Rhythmic.

Impossible to miss.

Now...

There was nothing.

His heart tightened.

What if something has happened to her?

Dear God...

That would be a catastrophe.

He quietly left the room.

The thought unsettled him more than he cared to admit. Instead of returning to her bedside, he walked into the living room and lowered himself onto the sofa. He needed a moment to think

Age had stolen something from him over the years. He was no longer capable of reacting instantly to emergencies the way he once had.

Suppose something really has happened...

What would I do?

He would grieve, of course. After all, she had been his companion for a lifetime. But grief could wait. First, he would call an ambulance. Perhaps ask one of the neighbors for help. Above all, he would have to remain calm. People would be watching him. He must appear composed—as he always had. Years of military service had taught him discipline. Life itself had trained him even better. He had survived enough disasters to know that panic only made tragedy heavier.

Then there were the children. He would have to notify them. Carefully.

The eldest son should hear it first. He would speak to him plainly, as one responsible man speaking to another. No unnecessary emotion. No confusion. A measured voice would soften the blow.

The youngest son was probably already at work. There was no point in upsetting him directly. Better to call his wife. She possessed a gentleness he lacked. She would know how to break the news.

His daughter... That would be the hardest call. She had inherited her mother's heart. Sensitive. Emotional. Quick to tears.

He imagined himself choosing every word with care.

"Your mother isn't feeling well."

"The doctor is here."

"She wants to see you."

Only then...

Only gradually...

Would he tell her the truth.

His thoughts wandered even further. He pictured the children rushing into the house. Faces drained of color. Eyes swollen from tears. Hands trembling with disbelief. They were adults now. Yet, in moments like these, no one remained an adult for very long. Someone would surely collapse. Someone would lose control.

He couldn't allow himself that luxury. Not then. Not in front of them. They would need someone to lean on.

Someone steady. Someone who could absorb their grief until they found the strength to bear it themselves. He had always believed he was that person. A soldier. A father. A man who had learned to stand upright while storms passed through him.

If the worst happened... He would be ready.

Nearly half an hour passed before he realized how long he had been sitting there**.** Ashamed of himself, he muttered a quiet prayer for forgiveness. He sought refuge from the dark thoughts that had invaded his mind. Then, determined to put an end to his foolish fears, he walked back to his eldest son's room. She hadn't moved. Not even an inch.

This time, as he stepped inside, something invisible seemed to hang in the air. He couldn't name it. He couldn't explain it. But the room felt... wrong.

He approached the bed. Softly, he called her name. No answer. He called again. Still nothing. He reached out and gently shook her shoulder. She remained motionless. He pulled the blanket away. Then shook her harder. Nothing. He touched her arm. Cold. Far colder than it should have been. A chill spread through his own body. He lifted one of her eyelids. Her eyes stared into nothing. Empty. Unseeing. He grabbed her wrist and pressed two fingers against it, searching desperately for the pulse he had convinced himself he would find. There was none. When he finally let go... Her arm dropped lifelessly onto the bed.

She had been dead all along.

Days later, his eldest son would remember only one thing about that phone call.

His father had been screaming.

Not speaking.

Not crying.

Screaming.

"Your mother... she's gone!"

The words came apart in gasps, swallowed by panic before they could become sentences. His daughter remembered it differently. To her, he had sounded like a man speaking from inside a nightmare. She couldn't make sense of anything he said. Only one word reached her clearly. Her mother's name. He repeated it again... and again... and again... until she dropped the phone and ran to him.

The neighbors would later say they had never heard such a cry. Not from him. He had always been the quiet one. The dignified retired officer. The man whose composure never deserted him. That morning, they watched him stumble out of the house trembling uncontrollably, his face drained of all color.

By the time the children arrived, he was sitting beside her body. Silent. Motionless. His eyes were fixed on her face, as if waiting for her to open her eyes and laugh at the terrible misunderstanding.

His entire body shook without pause.

They spoke to him. He didn't answer. They embraced him. He didn't react. They tried to lead him away from the room. He refused to move. Hours passed before exhaustion finally overwhelmed him. He collapsed unconscious beside the bed.

The funeral came and went. So did the mourners**.** He barely noticed. He never greeted anyone. Never accepted condolences. Most of the time he remained locked inside his room, staring blankly at the ceiling. Occasionally he whispered to himself. Fragments of words. Broken sentences. Conversations no one else could hear.

They had no choice but to summon a physician to examine him, as his condition had deteriorated alarmingly. He confessed to them, in that somber hour, that he was suffering from a severe nervous breakdown—one he attributed to the shattering blow of his wife's sudden death, a departure for which his soul had been utterly unprepared.

Though his children remained at his side, reaching out with their help and striving to ease his burden, his state only worsened, as if grief fed upon their very presence. In the end, they found no recourse but to commit him to a psychiatric facility, hoping that there he might regain the equilibrium he had lost, and piece together the fragments of a self that her abrupt departure had scattered to the winds.

The Alley

Saeed returned to his old neighborhood after seven years abroad. The moment he stepped into the narrow alley, memories came rushing back. The last time he had walked these streets, he had sworn never to return. Yet life had a way of making fools of solemn promises. After all those years of keeping his vow, he was forced to return to his old alley to witness his sister's wedding.

He had not wanted to inform anyone of his arrival date, which had changed several times anyway. He yearned desperately to see his family, though he had been careful since his departure to stay in touch with them whenever the chance arose. He missed them more than he had ever admitted. Especially his sister. After their father's death, he had become more than an older brother to her. Without realizing it, he had slipped into the role of a father. When he left, she had only just begun secondary school. Now he was returning to walk her down the aisle. Time, he thought, had moved far faster than numbers ever could. He made his living with calculations. Yet nothing had prepared him for this equation. The little girl who used to run after him with sticky hands full of candy... had somehow become a bride. A smile escaped him. He shook his head in disbelief, smiling faintly. Only one thing spoiled the moment. He wished only that the wedding had been held outside the alley, so he might avoid seeing its people—but that was not within his power.

He quickened his pace. His tailored suit felt strangely out of place among the crumbling buildings. In one hand, he carried an expensive leather bag filled with gifts. He intended to stay only a few days. Just long enough to celebrate with his family, make sure his mother and sister were well, then disappear back into the life he had built overseas. A life that had gradually become more familiar than home.

He gazed at the nearly empty alley, its narrow, winding streets devoid of passersby at this hour. It seemed everyone was at the wedding—that was the custom of popular celebrations, as he had known since childhood. Everyone abandoned their work to join in.

He walked slowly past the shuttered shops, old images returning to him unbidden—images upon which years had piled until he thought he had forgotten them. He looked around with unease. It seemed the hand of change had brought nothing new to the alley during all the time he had been away. The same old alley, its neglected streets worn only further by time, which had left its marks on some of its buildings. Time had passed over the neighborhood without leaving it any kinder

At the head of the alley sat "Al-Amin Bakery." He exhaled bitterly as he remembered how he used to stand there for hours under the scorching sun just to buy some bread. How many times had he fought because someone had cut in front of him in the seemingly endless queue? Or because someone had trampled him in the rush, stepping over people's heads to reach the bakery? He conjured the image of those moments—standing there, breathless, his clothes filthy, sweat pouring from him while Fathi Al-Amin sat inside, calmly puffing on his hookah, watching the scrambling bodies with utter indifference. They said he smuggled subsidized flour to the black market and made a fortune. He cared only for money; the people could go to hell for all he cared. Sa'eed closed his eyes, reliving those painful moments, and quickened his steps.

He turned his face away to avoid remembering more. A wave of disgust toward his alley grew inside him, threatening to consume him. The bitterness he felt in his throat now was inescapable. He became aware that he had stopped in front of "Abbas the Barber's" shop. He shook his head in annoyance. How many times had he come here? His father had always ordered him to go only to Abbas, his friend. He remembered how he used to obey, grumbling all the way. Abbas, the burly middle-aged man, knew only one haircut, which he inflicted upon every customer. As a child and then as a teenager, Sa'eed had tried to ask him for a modern style like the one his friends wore, but Abbas would mock him, curse every new fashion, and cling stubbornly to his signature cut. Every time he left Abbas's shop, he cursed him under his breath. Abbas was a talker, and sometimes he would leave Sa'eed in the barber's chair for a long time to go chat with a passing friend or buy goods from a peddler who happened by. He remembered how the electricity had once gone out, forcing him to be shaved by the light of an old lamp. When the power returned and he looked in the mirror, he almost wept in frustration at the small cuts scattered across his face and head. Nor could he forget the day he failed his Arabic exam in one of his early school years. His father had dragged him to the shop and ordered Abbas to shave his head completely as punishment. He had begged and struggled, but the giant barber held him fast and set to work without mercy. For an entire month afterward, he had stayed home, afraid to go out and face the street, terrified of being mocked by his classmates. He recalled those lessons as he cursed the barber and his studies alike—and never failed another exam.

He shook his head, hoping to shake off those memories. He continued on, crossing the alley to the left. He noticed piles of garbage carelessly dumped beside "Salah Al-Adham's Restaurant." He wondered with disgust, when would civilization reach these people? He remembered the restaurant. A small establishment where Salah stood morning and evening before an old fire, preparing hot falafel and beans—the

food that had filled his stomach for so long simply because he could find no alternative within his meager allowance. He could still taste the hot falafel, pulled from oil that had turned black from overuse. He ate it without appetite, downing glass after glass of water afterward to quell the heat that would settle in his chest. He remembered bitterly how many times he had found rotten tomatoes in the sandwiches he bought on his way to school, or how Salah, as was his habit, would over-salt the food until it became barely edible.

He quickened his pace slightly. He passed by "Uncle Ashour the Tailor's" shop. How many clothes had he had tailored here? He remembered the last time he had asked for a pair of trousers. When they were finished, they were so tight he could not wear them. He asked the old man to adjust the size, but the tailor took so long that Sa'eed regretted his request. And when he finally finished, the trousers were so wide on his slender frame that he could not wear them either. He did not want to go back to him again. He threw the trousers into his closet and never wore them.

Beads of sweat trickled down his face. He pulled out his scented handkerchief and stopped to catch his breath briefly, then resumed his walk. He approached "Uncle Kamel the Grocer's" shop. He prayed to God that it would be closed. He had always hated this man. When he was young, his mother would call him several times a day to buy things from the grocery while he was completely absorbed in playing with his friends. He would abandon his play in a fury, cursing the many errands and cursing Uncle Kamel the grocer along with them. Why could his mother not ask for everything at once? And why could Uncle Kamel not close his shop early and spare him the trips back and forth all day? He remembered the day he bought some milk from him. When he brought it home, his mother discovered it was sour. Furious, she ordered him to go back and pour it in "Kamel the Cheat's" face, as she had screamed. He was small and scared. He went and poured the milk out somewhere else and bought more from his own allowance at a distant shop. He could not forget Mahmoud, Kamel's son, who had been his classmate for years. He did not like him, but he was forced to study with him because they were neighbors. He breathed easier after he passed the secondary school exam while Mahmoud had failed. He quickened his pace, panting toward his house. He turned left, and there was Uncle Jamil's perfume shop. Uncle Jamil was known for imitating expensive perfumes and selling them to the alley's residents at a cheap price. How could he forget the day he bought a bottle of perfume and used it? That evening, red spots appeared on his neck and hands. He had not known he was allergic to perfumes, and he had to see a doctor.

He cursed the alley inwardly, and everything connected to it. He turned right, and his eyes fell upon "Hamada the Bicycle Man's" shop. He glared at it with barely

contained anger. When he grew older, riding his small bicycle became embarrassing in front of his friends, and his father could not buy him a new one, so he grew accustomed to coming here to rent bicycles. He remembered when he rented a bicycle for just one hour to play with his friends. He lost track of time and was late. Hamada went to his father to complain. That night, his father punished him severely. And Hamada was not satisfied with that—he charged him for an extra hour's rent even though he had been only a few minutes late.

Now he was approaching his house. He could see it from afar. He breathed in relief. He stopped in front of the last shop before the house—"Rushdi the Watchmaker's." The shop was closed too. He still remembered that day when he was playing ball with his friends in front of his house. He had been consumed by the excitement of the match. The two teams were tied; whoever scored first would win. He received the ball skillfully from his friend Saleh and struck it hard. He scored a beautiful goal that ended the match, and he leaped for joy. But the ball had been hit so hard that it flew far away and shattered the glass of Rushdi the Watchmaker's shop. For two months afterward, he paid for the broken glass out of his small allowance after Uncle Rushdi complained to his father.

He had always hated this alley. He had begged his mother many times to leave it for a new place, but she clung to her old home. And worse, she had insisted on holding his sister's wedding right there, in front of their old house, despite his strong objections. He wished he could avoid meeting any of its people, but there was no escape from that. His mother had been urging him to come early. He had not forgotten that he was the man of the house after his father's death. He had wanted to help her bear the burden of the celebration, but his work circumstances had not allowed it. His mother had understood.

Finally, he was approaching the house. Twinkling lights greeted him, filling the space while red carpets were spread along the path. As he drew closer, he could not help but stop. His eyes widened in astonishment. He stood dazzled, staring at what surrounded him with a wonder he could not hide. He had expected a small celebration, but he was taken aback by a grand feast unlike anything he had ever seen in the alley before. Bouquets of roses were scattered in every corner. Chairs were everywhere. A massive stage blocked the entire alley, and huge speakers surrounded him. Lights covered his old house from the ground to the roof and stretched to cover many neighboring houses as well. The moment some of the attendees spotted him, they rushed to welcome him. His old friends hurried to embrace him. He had not expected such a warm reception after all his years away from the alley and its people. He returned their greetings warmly as he tried to make

his way with difficulty toward his house. The bride was still inside; the ceremony had not yet begun. He lifted his eyes to the sky, grateful that he had arrived in time. He hurried toward the house, climbing the stairs quickly. The wedding lights extended inside, where some women had gathered to sing joyfully. The women hurried out upon learning of his arrival. His mother greeted him at the door with longing the moment news of his arrival reached her. The moment he saw her, he threw himself into her arms and lost track of time. Tears streamed from her eyes as he stood in her embrace. He kissed her head, then surrendered again to her warm arms, wishing time would stop so he could remain like that forever. She patted his shoulder tenderly, then composed herself and wiped her tears. She took his hands, smiling at him with longing, assuring herself he was well. She led him gently inside, to his sister's room. He knocked softly and slipped inside. A few friends who had remained with the bride to adorn her slipped out. The moment his eyes fell upon her, he froze. He could not believe his eyes. His little one had truly become a bride, her beauty crowned by a magnificent white gown. He approached her in a daze, barely holding back the tears that threatened to fall from his eyes, while hers flowed freely. He remembered that she had promised him she would not walk down the aisle to her groom without him by her side. She would not let anyone else hold her hand and lead her into a new life except him. She threw herself into his arms, and he kissed her head with longing. He patted her cheek tenderly, then hurried out before his emotions could overcome him, leaving her to complete her adornment.

The sounds of music swelled from outside. He stepped onto the balcony and looked out over the alley while his sister hurried to adjust her finery. He felt his mother beside him, looking with him at the movement that swirled through the street. He held her warmly with one arm. After a moment, he whispered in her ear, "I did not expect such a celebration." She patted his hand gently. "The people of the alley have not left us alone for a moment. They took care of everything. They truly loved your late father, and they swore to hold a celebration for his daughter worthy of their love—and to make up for his absence.

He breathed deeply as he looked out over the alley. Everyone seemed in constant motion, finishing the wedding preparations. In the distance, Ali Al-Amin stood carrying a stack of chairs, arranging them while Abbas the Barber helped him, his back bent under the weight of a large chair he carried. Sa'eed remembered how, when his father was ill, Ali Al-Amin had insisted on sending bread to the house every morning with one of his boys. And Abbas the Barber, who had stood by his father throughout his illness and stayed with him in the hospital until the moment of his death. He watched Ashour the Tailor, in his white robe and his Hejazi cloak—which he wore only on special occasions—standing to receive the well-wishers.

Everyone loved this man. They considered him the elder of the alley for his age and dignity. Ashour had not left his house for some time due to illness, Sa'eed had heard, but now he forced himself to join in the celebration. He caught sight of Uncle Kamel the Grocer and his son Mahmoud—his old classmate—at the end of the alley, enthusiastically moving crates of drinks, preparing to distribute them to the guests. Sa'eed did not forget the day he passed his secondary school exam. The first to learn the results was Uncle Kamel, who had gone to the school to find out his own son's grade. He had greeted Sa'eed in the alley that day with warmth, embracing him in congratulation as if he were his own father, proud and full of affection. Sa'eed had never forgotten that embrace. And although Mahmoud had failed, that did not stop Uncle Kamel from distributing drinks throughout the alley in celebration of Sa'eed's success—a spontaneous, sincere celebration whose impact he still remembered. Uncle Jamil stood in the distance arranging giant bouquets of roses. When Sa'eed had traveled abroad, Uncle Jamil had insisted on driving him to the airport in his small car, even though his flight was after midnight and the old man used to sleep early—and he had stayed at the airport until he was certain Sa'eed was safe. In the house opposite, he caught sight of Salah Al-Adham on one of the balconies, hanging strings of lights, balancing himself precariously on the railing. He remembered the nights of Ramadan, when he would go before dawn to buy hot beans for the pre-dawn meal. Salah had always served him first, despite the crowd of customers, as a kindness to his father—and he would heap extra tahini on the foul because he knew Sa'eed loved it. The music began to blare loudly. The groom must have arrived. On the stage, Hamada the Bicycle Man tested the microphones and speakers, making sure everything was in order. Sa'eed did not forget the day he had rented a bicycle from him, raced his friends with abandon, lost his balance, fell, and blood streamed from his nose. Hamada had been the first to rush to him. He did not care about the damaged bicycle. He picked Sa'eed up and carried him quickly to the clinic in the neighboring alley, not bringing him home until he was certain Sa'eed was safe.

His mother interrupted the thread of his memories. The time for the wedding had come. He stepped forward to his sister. She took his arm as he prepared to walk her to her groom. They descended the stairs slowly as the music swelled outside. They emerged into the alley, his hand in hers. A chorus of ululations rose, and some people began to dance. Rushdi the Watchmaker fired several celebratory shots into the air, their sound drowning out the music as he danced with joy. They walked slowly as the wedding band accompanied them from the house to the massive stage that filled the middle of the street. The people of the alley formed a circle around Sa'eed, who stood at its center. He looked at the celebration and at the people of the alley—some had merged into the dancing with abandon, while others clapped enthusiastically. Sa'eed gazed at all those smiling faces. A feeling stirred inside him, something

unexpected that washed over him and made him surrender to it. He stood in the midst of the noisy crowd around him, allowing a flood of emotions to overtake him. He smiled for the first time since arriving at the alley—and for the first time in seven full years.

Sa'eed felt safe.

The Circle of Thieves

Saber finished work and headed straight to the neighborhood market to buy a few groceries before his children returned from school. He stopped first at the small produce shop near his home. Although the vegetables on display looked far from fresh, the prices had somehow gone up again.

He asked the shopkeeper, a perpetually scowling man, why everything had become so expensive. At first, the man ignored him. Then, with obvious impatience, he muttered, "That's how the market works—supply and demand." The same tired excuse. Saber had heard it countless times before. By that logic, prices ought to fall every now and then when demand dropped. But with merchants like these, prices seemed to know only one direction.

Up.

He paid for his groceries, muttering bitterly under his breath. The shopkeeper knew perfectly well that there were no other produce stores nearby. He had his customers trapped. "There isn't an ounce of decency left in people anymore," Saber murmured as he hurried home. Behind him, the burly shopkeeper watched him leave, took a slow drag on his cigarette, and exhaled without the slightest hint of concern.

***

Saeed closed his produce shop earlier than usual. He had an appointment with his doctor. That cursed cough had refused to leave him for weeks. Every fit felt as though it would crack his ribs apart, and sleeping through the night had become nearly impossible. Perhaps years of smoking were finally taking their toll, even though he had stopped spending his evenings at the café and smoking shisha with his friends almost a week earlier.

He made his way to the clinic with heavy steps. As expected, the waiting room was packed. His broad frame barely squeezed through the narrow doorway. He glanced around at the handful of battered chairs and the damp-stained walls. For a physician with such a celebrated reputation, the clinic was surprisingly shabby.

He waited for hours, suppressing his irritation. When his turn finally came, he was startled to discover that the consultation fee had nearly doubled. He had been there only two weeks earlier, when the doctor had prescribed medicine that had done nothing to ease the cough. Reluctantly, he handed over the money and asked himself why the fee had increased so dramatically. The doctor examined him briefly before

ordering a series of blood tests and chest scans. Oddly enough, he insisted that Saeed visit an imaging center on the other side of town, even though several others were only a few streets away. People said the doctor received a commission for every patient he referred there.

The consultation lasted no more than three minutes. The doctor scribbled another prescription—this time for medication that would merely suppress the cough—and immediately called in the next patient. Saeed folded the prescription, slipped it into his pocket, and walked out more frustrated than before. He hadn't come looking for temporary relief. He wanted someone to treat the illness itself, not simply silence its symptoms.

***

Shortly before midnight, the nurse finished cleaning the clinic. Exhausted, the doctor remained at his desk for a few more minutes, going over the day's earnings before finally heading home. By the time he arrived, the children were already asleep, but his wife was still awake, waiting for him. As usual, he ate dinner alone.

Just as he was about to crawl into bed, she asked for the household allowance. Half asleep, he reached into his wallet and handed her the usual amount. She looked at the money for a moment before quietly asking for more. When he asked why, she muttered, "The children's tutors have raised their fees." He frowned. "All of them? Overnight? Damn it." Their children depended heavily on private tutoring. Between the clinic and his exhausting morning shifts at the public hospital, he barely had time to see them, let alone help them with homework or prepare them for exams. For all his concern about money, he knew that his children were his greatest investment. That was why he had enrolled them in one of the city's best private schools, hoping they would receive the education he had always dreamed of for them. Yet every evening the house filled with tutors—mathematics, science, languages, one after another—each claiming another share of his income.

He couldn't help wondering why schoolteachers no longer did their jobs well enough inside the classroom. He himself had never taken a single private lesson. Why, then, couldn't his children rely on the education they were already paying for? For a fleeting moment, he considered refusing the increase. Then he sighed. Nothing mattered more than seeing his children succeed. Whatever it cost, he wanted them to become doctors one day—just like him.

Without another word, he pulled a few more bills from his wallet and handed them to his wife. He hated being taken advantage of. The whole affair left a bitter taste in his mouth. Though fatigue weighed heavily on him, sleep refused to come.

***

The tutor glanced at his watch as the lesson came to an end. The doctor's wife handed him his pay, and he quickly made sure she hadn't forgotten the increase he had recently requested. Satisfied, he slipped the money into his pocket and hurried out.

He had no more lessons scheduled that evening, but he needed to stop by the repair shop to pick up his car, which had broken down unexpectedly the day before. After waiting what felt like an eternity for a taxi, he finally reached the garage in an increasingly foul mood. Life without his car was almost impossible. It was his livelihood, carrying him from one lesson to the next according to the relentless timetable he kept every day. Without it, he wasted precious hours he simply couldn't afford to lose.

The moment he arrived, he asked Adel, the mechanic, what had gone wrong. Adel launched into a stream of technical jargon that might as well have been another language. The tutor nodded politely, understanding almost none of it. Deep down, he was convinced the problem had been minor. The car was still relatively new. But mechanics, like so many craftsmen, had a talent for turning the smallest fault into a catastrophe whenever a customer's wallet was involved.

Adel explained that one of the engine components had been beyond repair and had to be replaced with an expensive new part. The tutor knew too little about cars to challenge him. He was almost certain the engine had never needed replacing, yet arguing would get him nowhere. Experience was on the mechanic's side, not his. Reluctantly, he counted out the money and handed it over. The bill was far higher than he had expected. When he climbed into the driver's seat, he noticed the interior was dusty and out of place. Someone had clearly been using the car. "The bastard took it for a ride," he thought, swallowing his anger. He started the engine and drove away, cursing under his breath. Behind him, Adel watched the car disappear into the traffic. Calmly, he wiped the grease from his hands with a rag so old its original color had long since vanished.

***

Adel took a long shower before getting dressed. He had been looking forward to this day all week. Friday meant closing the garage early and heading back to his village.

Ever since moving to the city years ago, he had never missed the chance to spend his day off with his family. That was the only place where he truly felt at peace. Had it not been for necessity—and the greater opportunities the city offered—he would never have left his village behind.

He smiled as he thought of his fiancée. Three years of engagement had slipped by faster than he could have imagined. Only a few weeks now separated them from their wedding. At last, the new house was finished. It had swallowed nearly everything he had earned. Rising prices and soaring labor costs had stretched the construction over three exhausting years, and more than once he had feared he would never see it completed. "Almost there," he murmured to himself.

After buying a few small gifts, he made his way to the bus station. Rain had been falling since the afternoon, and it was already late, but nothing was going to stop him from going home. Waiting until morning would only steal another precious day from his family. The station was overflowing with people. Aging minibuses stood in crooked lines like weathered dice tossed carelessly across the pavement. After a long wait, he finally managed to squeeze into one. Built for ten passengers, it carried at least fourteen, every seat overflowing and every inch of standing room occupied.

No matter how many times he traveled this road, he always arrived home feeling as though every bone in his body had been shaken loose by the endless potholes. Worse still was the driver's reckless determination to hit every one of them at full speed, as though he earned a bonus for each jolt that rattled the vehicle. Halfway through the journey, Adel reached into his pocket and pulled out the usual fare. Before he could hand it over, the driver barked that everyone would have to pay double. Heavy traffic, too few vehicles—that was his excuse. A murmur of protest rippled through the passengers, but no one raised a voice. The same performance. Every weekend. The drivers always took advantage of people desperate to get home, charging whatever they pleased.

Adel remembered the last time the passengers had objected. The driver had calmly pulled a thick metal chain from beneath his seat and given everyone two choices, neither of them appealing: pay the extra fare, or get out in the middle of nowhere. A few passengers climbed out without another word. So had Adel. He had spent hours stranded beside the empty fields until dawn. The only vehicle that finally stopped for him was a livestock truck heading in the same direction.

He had no desire to repeat that ordeal. Not tonight. Not in the cold rain. Silently, he handed over the extra money, though the injustice burned inside him. The same thing

would happen again on his return journey. He already knew it. "Thieves," he thought bitterly. "Nothing but thieves, feeding on other people's need." An hour later, the minibus finally disgorged its passengers onto the roadside before roaring away, leaving behind a thick cloud of black exhaust that sent several of them into violent coughing fits.

***

The driver hurried home, desperate for a few hours of sleep. His last shift had stretched to fifteen exhausting hours, sustained by countless cups of tea, an endless stream of cigarettes, and a handful of cheap locally made stimulant pills. He didn't usually work such punishing hours, but weekends were different. More passengers meant more money.

His wife greeted him with little enthusiasm, while the children were still asleep. The moment his head touched the pillow, he drifted into a deep, dreamless sleep. Less than two hours later, she shook him awake. He lurched upright in panic. For a brief moment, his mind was so clouded that he stared at the woman standing over him without recognizing her. She reminded him that he had asked her to wake him after exactly two hours. Squinting at his watch through half-open eyes, he groaned. Time for the second shift. Friday traffic would keep the roads full until late evening, and every extra passenger meant a little more money.

Still unsteady from the abrupt awakening, he pulled on his clothes and opened the wardrobe. From the back of a drawer, he took out a thick bundle of cash—the savings of the past two years.

Today, at last, he would have enough for the down payment on the new minibus he had dreamed of for so long. A newer vehicle would finally allow him to compete with the established drivers instead of clinging to the battered relic he drove now, a machine that swallowed money in repairs without ever becoming reliable. He barely had time to glance at his children, let alone eat breakfast. He climbed into the old minibus and turned the key. The engine coughed twice, fell silent, then finally came to life on the fourth attempt.

Half asleep, he pulled into the road. Six more hours passed, shuttling endlessly between the village and the city. When his shift finally ended, he counted the day's earnings, tucked them carefully into his pocket, and drove straight to the dealership.

Exhaustion vanished the moment he stepped inside. For years he had imagined this day. The showroom owner was busy with another customer, leaving him free to

stand before the vehicle he had chosen. Its polished body gleamed beneath the showroom lights, flawless enough to seem almost unreal. Tomorrow, he thought, he would drive it home—but not before stopping at the florist he knew along the way to decorate it. A new bride deserved flowers. A bride had demanded an expensive dowry. He had paid for it with his time... his health... and moments stolen from his children.

His thoughts were interrupted by the owner's gravelly voice welcoming him over. Smiling, he laid the money on the desk. The owner's expression changed. He hesitated. "I'm afraid the prices have gone up," he said apologetically. "The manufacturer raised them this week, and since we're the exclusive dealer, the down payment has increased as well."

For a long moment, the driver simply stared at him. He couldn't find the words. Only a few weeks earlier, he had stood in this very showroom discussing the same vehicle. How could the price have climbed so dramatically in such a short time? Silently, he gathered his money and slipped it back into his pocket. His dream had been postponed once again. The ox, it seemed, would have to keep turning the millstone a little longer before it could buy its freedom. Without another word, he walked out of the showroom, his shoulders heavy with disappointment, while the owner watched him leave with nothing more than a passing glance.

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The heat inside the government office was suffocating.

The car dealer had been waiting for what felt like an eternity. His eyes wandered over the towers of files piled haphazardly across the desks. A tea boy appeared with a cup of bitter coffee, lingering just long enough to suggest he was hoping for a generous tip from a customer he clearly recognized. "Mr. Saber will be here any minute," he said with a practiced smile. "He's in an important meeting."

The dealer glanced impatiently at his watch and reviewed the documents spread across his lap—the same documents that had brought him here in the first place. His latest shipment. Imported cars for his showroom. Held at customs because some paperwork was missing. The authorities claimed the vehicles' origin could not be verified. He had dealt with situations like this before. The previous official had been easy enough to handle until he was dismissed on bribery charges. The new one was different. People spoke of him as an honest man with a spotless record.

Still...

Everyone had a price. This shipment meant everything. Without it, a financial crisis that had been creeping toward him for months might finally swallow his business whole. He took another sip of the dreadful coffee and silently rehearsed the conversation he hoped would solve the problem—whatever it might cost.

Saber entered a few minutes later, carrying a stack of heavy files. He looked exhausted. That morning he had overslept and missed the government bus, forcing him to walk all the way to work because the few pounds in his pocket couldn't justify the luxury of taking a taxi. He barely noticed the visitor until he reached his desk. A large man in an expensive suit sat waiting comfortably, a porcelain coffee cup balanced elegantly between his fingers.

Saber lowered the files onto his desk and looked at him through the thick lenses of his glasses. The man stood, introduced himself in a deep voice, and handed over the folder without another word. Saber skimmed through the papers before calmly closing the file again.

"I'm afraid these documents are incomplete."

The dealer smiled. It was the sort of smile that had opened many doors before. He glanced toward the hallway to make sure no one was watching. Outside, the tea boy had conveniently stationed himself by the office door, politely diverting anyone who tried to enter.

The dealer leaned closer. "I'm counting on your help," he said softly. "It's an important shipment, and every day's delay costs me a fortune. Honestly... all it needs is your signature."

He rose from his chair, walked casually around the desk, and slid a thick envelope into the half-open drawer. He made no attempt to hide what was inside. Several bundles of banknotes protruded just enough to make their purpose unmistakable. Then he returned to his seat, lit a cigarette, and waited as though nothing unusual had happened. The tea boy stepped inside for a moment, but the dealer dismissed him with a subtle gesture. The young man obeyed immediately.

"So, this wasn't his first visit here," Saber thought.

The dealer's phone rang. As he answered it, Saber found himself unexpectedly alone with his thoughts. For the first time since his promotion to this department, he was facing a choice like this. He knew exactly what a single signature could accomplish.

If he refused, the dealer would almost certainly find another way—through his manager, perhaps, or someone even higher up.

The shipment would leave eventually. Only the name beneath the signature might change. His thoughts drifted to his wife. His children. The worn-out clothes hanging from his thin shoulders. His salary. A salary expected to battle prices that climbed relentlessly, devouring everything in their path. It was a battle no honest man could win.

A vicious circle...

One that tightened around people like him day after day, showing mercy to no one who remained outside it.

Perhaps... the only way to survive... was to become part of it.

His eyes returned to the envelope. To the money. A lifeline... or the first link in a chain.

The dealer ended his call and looked up.

Saber was still staring at the cash.

This time...

With far less resistance in his eyes.

Birthday Party

She woke from a brief, restless nap. Despite the pain, she forced herself to her feet, using the edge of the bed for support. She stood motionless for several seconds, unable to move, until she had gathered enough strength to take a few slow, steady steps. Reaching the living room, she let herself sink wearily into the first chair she came to. But the moment her eyes fell on the clock and she saw that it was noon, she sprang up in alarm.

Once again, she paused for a few moments to steady herself before making her way slowly toward the kitchen. Her son would be home from work in two hours. She had to finish preparing lunch before he arrived. She knew he would come home hungry, always eager to eat before even changing his clothes. She was the one who had taught him, ever since he was a child, never to eat restaurant food. She had never trusted it anyway. No matter how long his workday was, he always waited until he got home to share a meal with her. It was the only time of day they could sit together before he headed out again for his evening shift.

The thought filled her with renewed energy. She felt a flicker of strength return to her frail body. She lit the stove. Why did everything seem so blurred today? Perhaps it was the cataracts she had neglected for far too long. Her doctor had repeatedly urged her to undergo surgery as soon as possible, but she was terrified of operations. Her husband had died on an operating table. Besides, her children still needed her. She couldn't bear the thought of being away from home—and away from them—for long.

She began washing the fresh vegetables the building's caretaker had bought that morning while the rich aroma of clarified butter rose from the pot warming on the stove. As she reached for the knife to chop the onions, she noticed her hands trembling. The shaking had never been this severe before. She must have forgotten to take her medication. She would take it later. The day ahead was far too busy. First, she had to finish preparing lunch before her son came home. Then she could put the finishing touches on the celebration she had been looking forward to—her youngest son's birthday.

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The doorbell rang. It had to be Sabah, the nurse. She visited every morning, following the doctor's instructions. She usually stayed for an hour or more, making

sure the old woman was taking her medication regularly and giving her the painful daily injections the doctor had prescribed.

Leaning against the walls for support, she slowly made her way to the front door and opened it. Sabah's cheerful face greeted her. Her own voice came out weaker than she intended as she welcomed her inside. As always, Sabah kissed her on the cheek before stepping into the apartment. It had become a habit. Although she had been visiting for only a few weeks, the old woman already felt a strange sense of closeness to her.

Sabah walked over to the sofa in the living room, sat down, and began searching through her medical bag. The old woman followed, dragging her feet with difficulty. They exchanged a few words before she excused herself, saying she had to get back to the kitchen and finish preparing lunch before her son came home.

Sabah glanced at the clock, puzzled.

"Today's Thursday," she said. "Doesn't your son usually come home late on Thursdays?"

She suddenly remembered that her son always came home late on Thursdays because of his weekly meeting at work. She silently cursed the forgetfulness that had begun to invade her fragile memory without mercy. She turned off the stove and returned to her seat beside Sabah, who had already taken several medical instruments out of her bag.

As usual, Sabah began by checking her blood pressure, which was high once again. Then she helped her to the bedroom to administer her daily injection. The moment Sabah stepped into the room, her eyes fell on the pile of medications carelessly scattered across the small bedside table. She knew her patient suffered from several chronic illnesses, and she couldn't help recalling the doctor's stern instructions during their last visit.

"She needs plenty of rest, and she must take her medication regularly. Any unnecessary effort or exhaustion could put serious strain on her weakened heart. Try to make sure her children understand that."

But Sabah had never met any of her children.

She turned to the old woman, who had lowered herself onto the bed with visible pain.

"You really need to rest," she said gently. "Those were the doctor's instructions."

The old woman offered no reply.

She was neither foolish nor too old to understand the rules of life. She knew her illness had passed the stage where treatment promised hope. Now she was simply waiting for fate to take its course. All she wanted was enough pain relief to keep fulfilling her role. Not even a thousand doctors could persuade her to stop caring for her children.

It was the only source of happiness left in her life.

They were grown now, but they still depended on her. The illness itself did not frighten her. What she feared was seeing the curtain fall on the role she had devoted her life to—the role of a mother raising children who had spent most of their lives without the shelter of a father.

She smiled at Sabah and tried to get up to prepare something for her to drink. The painkiller usually gave her a burst of energy, but a sudden stab of pain forced her back onto the bed. She would have to wait a little longer until the injection had fully taken effect.

Taking advantage of the quiet moment, Sabah began chatting, as she always did. The old woman listened patiently for nearly half an hour. After Sabah left, kissing her goodbye as usual, the old woman returned to the kitchen to continue her work. She mixed flour, eggs, and sugar in a large bowl, baked a generous cake, and placed it in the oven to rise slowly. Then she headed toward her bedroom to take the morning medication she had forgotten.

On the way, her eyes fell on Mahmoud's room. Her youngest son's room. Suddenly, she remembered something else. This time she scolded her failing memory even more harshly. She immediately turned toward his room. She always postponed cleaning it until just a few hours before he arrived so it would be ready to welcome him. Once again, she decided the medicine could wait.

Today was Mahmoud's weekly day off. He usually arrived around five o'clock, just like his older brother. At the end of every week, the family was finally together again. He worked as an accountant at a large bank in the capital, far from home. He finished work early on Thursdays, traveled home to see her, spent Thursday evening with her, Friday with his friends, then returned at the end of the day.

One day a week...

Better than nothing.

His birthday wasn't until the middle of the following week, but she wanted to surprise him by celebrating it today. Despite its weight, she carried a bucket of water into the room. She watered the flowers he loved to grow along the windowsill, dusted the furniture, spread clean sheets over the bed, opened the window to let the sunlight in, carefully mopped the floor, and put everything back in its proper place.

A fierce pain tore through her back, as though dozens of tiny hammers were pounding against her bones. She breathed heavily...

Yet she kept working.

She was almost finished. Mahmoud always left his room in a mess. She loved that about him. Smiling to herself, she wiped the dust from the glass covering his photograph. People often said he looked just like her. Strong-willed. Stubborn. They also said she had spoiled him. Why shouldn't she? He was her youngest child. She had never denied him anything. He had always confided in her, sharing every problem and every secret. Yet she had also known when to be strict for his own good.

She remembered the day she had punished him severely after he failed his first exam following his father's death. He never failed another one. He had inherited her love of mathematics, and she had encouraged him every step of the way. Perhaps that was why he had chosen to study commerce and eventually become an accountant. She had lost count of the nights she had stayed awake beside him in this very room while he studied for his exams.

Later, when he found a job far away and hesitated to accept it, she was the one who urged him to act like a man instead of a frightened child. Then she had cried on the first night the house stood empty without him... and slept in his room.

He, too, always appeared strong in front of other people. But beneath that strength lay a remarkably tender heart. She had only one wish—that he would never inherit her weak, ailing heart.

She set the table with quiet enthusiasm. Today, her small family would gather for their weekly reunion. They had never been separated like this before.

Memories came rushing back.

When her husband died, many people had bet she would fail. A working mother with no husband, left with almost nothing, and two young boys who needed her more than ever. Life had assigned her three roles to perform on its stage: mother, father, and provider. Some had waited eagerly for her to collapse—especially her husband's family. They believed it would only be a matter of time before they could end their long-standing disputes with her by taking the boys away.

But she endured.

She persevered.

She fought on.

She had never considered herself a strong woman, yet her love for her children gave her a strength she had never imagined she possessed. Her job as an accountant at a large company, together with her late husband's modest pension, spared her the humiliation of asking others for help. She enrolled her sons in private schools whose classes ended late in the afternoon, allowing her to finish work, stop by the market, and pick them up afterward. The routine exhausted her at first and drained every ounce of her strength.

She fought a long legal battle against her husband's family after they declared their intention to take custody of the boys. More than once she came close to giving up, but her fear for her children only strengthened her resolve.

In the end, she won.

The price, however, was everything that had slowly slipped down her list of priorities behind her children—her health above all.

She sacrificed the chance to remarry. Before that, she had sacrificed a sum of money that could have solved nearly all her problems when her manager asked her to manipulate the company's accounts to evade taxes. It wasn't only her conscience that made her refuse. She could not bear the thought of watching her sons grow up on money earned through dishonesty. Her refusal was firm. Her manager made her life miserable until she was forced to leave for another job. Her burdens grew heavier. Still, she never surrendered.

Illness found her early in life and claimed her heart, but she never allowed it to weaken her determination. She gave her sons everything she could. She never allowed a strange man into her home. She taught herself enough to help them with their schoolwork so they would never need a private tutor crossing the threshold of a house occupied only by a woman and her children.

She raised them to be decent men. She gave them confidence from an early age. Neither of them ever felt less fortunate than anyone else. Sometimes even the neighbors' children envied them. Her only regret was that she had never given her boys a sister—someone who could become a second mother to them and carry on part of her role after she was gone.

It saddened her that her sons could meet only once a week now, but she understood that such was life. This was no time for memories. She shook her head gently, as though reminding herself.

Today was her son's day.

His birthday—a day she had celebrated every year since he was a little boy.

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When she finished arranging the room, she glanced at the clock. It was nearly three. Was time passing more quickly... or had she simply become unbearably slow?

She had less than two hours before her older son came home from work. A few minutes later, her younger son would arrive. Yet she still had so much to do. She went into the kitchen to make sure the cake she had baked for the occasion was done. Then she hurried to change her clothes. She still had to buy sweets and a few other things. She could ask the building caretaker to do it, but she didn't trust his taste.

By the time she finished dressing, she was breathing as though she had just completed a long race. Standing at the front door, she suddenly remembered that she still hadn't taken her medication. It could wait until she got back.

Holding tightly to the stair rail, she began making her way downstairs one step at a time, relying almost entirely on one leg after the other had been shattered in a fall in the bathroom the previous year. At her age, the bone had never healed properly. It took her a full ten minutes to reach the street.

The heat struck her immediately. The harsh sunlight forced her to close her eyes for a moment. Slowly and with great effort, she made her way to a shop she had known for years. There were similar stores much closer to home, but experience had taught her that none of them matched its quality. By the time she arrived, her breathing had turned into a rasping wheeze. The cool air inside the shop startled her, and she paused for a moment to catch her breath. She chose several kinds of sweets and asked the shopkeeper to wrap them carefully. Carrying the large bags outside, she wondered whether the sun had grown hotter... or whether she herself had simply grown weaker.

With difficulty, she continued to another shop farther away to buy the remaining items. By then, she could feel an unusual warmth spreading through her body. She chose candles shaped like the number of her son's age. Then she bought fruit juice, cold drinks, and a few more things. Only then did she realize how heavy the bags had become.

She started the long walk back. Crossing the street with great difficulty, she stopped at a perfume shop and bought an expensive fragrance her younger son loved. She asked the salesman to wrap it as a gift. She did not forget her older son. She bought him another bottle—the brand he preferred. As always, she celebrated them both together. Carrying everything once again, she stepped back into the street.

The weight forced her to slow down. She could hear her own breathing now. Her heart was pounding harder. Perhaps it was excitement over the celebration she had spent all day preparing. But the beating was painful—as though a cold metal spike were slowly piercing her heart. She ignored it. The afternoon had grown even hotter, and there was hardly any shade left along the street. She refused to stop. There wasn't time. Only a few more yards... and she would be home.

The veins stood out along her hands as she tightened her grip on the bags. Just a few more minutes. She pushed herself onward. The world around her was growing increasingly blurred. Everything had lost its sharpness. The cataracts clouding her eyes must have worsened. Her back bent beneath the weight of the bags, though she had spent her entire life walking with quiet dignity, her head held high. Her body burned. She gasped for breath. Yet each step became slower, despite the greater effort she poured into it. A strange heaviness crept into her legs. She refused to stop.

She could see her building in the distance. It looked miles away. She drew in deeper breaths, yet only a trace of air seemed to reach her lungs. The sounds of the street faded. The pounding of her heart drowned out everything else.

Still...

she kept walking.

She tried to look at her watch. Her vision dissolved into a blur. The pain withdrew from every part of her body until it settled entirely in her heart. There was air everywhere around her... yet none of it seemed able to enter her chest. Gradually, a crimson haze spread across her vision until everything before her was stained the same deep red. A violent tremor ran through her limbs.

At last, she reached the entrance to her building. But she could no longer keep her balance. She stumbled. Her strength gave way.

And against her will...

she collapsed.

***

Sabah learned what had happened the following day. They had found the old woman lying at the entrance to her building, collapsed on the ground, one hand still tightly clutching the shopping bags she had refused to let go of. By the time the doctor arrived, there was nothing left to be done. Her relatives took care of all the arrangements.

Although Sabah had feared something like this might happen, the news still came as a shock. What hurt even more was losing someone she had grown so unexpectedly attached to in such a short time.

That evening, she stopped by the house. Her heart tightened as she saw the funeral tent erected outside. Tears welled up despite herself as she remembered the kind, gentle woman whose brief presence had left such a lasting mark on her heart.

A handful of men stood at the entrance receiving mourners. The only face she recognized was the building's caretaker. A well-dressed man in a dark suit stood at the front of the receiving line, accepting condolences with quiet composure. She had never seen him before. Just then, the caretaker stepped outside carrying a stack of chairs. She walked over to him and asked what had happened.

He told her the story. She struggled to hold back her emotions as he spoke. When he finished, she asked where the old woman's sons were so she could offer her condolences. The caretaker pointed toward the man in the suit.

"That's her eldest son."

Sabah looked at him in silence for a long moment.

Then she slowly shook her head.

"I've never seen him before," she said quietly. "Even though I visited her every single day."

The caretaker stared at her in surprise.

"How could you?" he blurted out. "He's been living in Canada for the past five years."

For a few seconds, she simply stood there, stunned.

"In Canada...?" she repeated almost unconsciously. "How...?"

She gathered herself with difficulty, looked at him again, and asked, "But she never once told me he was abroad. What about her younger son?"

"He's been working in one of the Gulf countries," the caretaker replied as he continued carrying chairs. "He got a job there a few months after his brother emigrated. A year later, he came back, got married, and left again with his wife. Neither of them has returned since. The older one only arrived this morning after hearing the news. The younger one... maybe he'll make it tomorrow."

He paused for a moment, then sighed.

"May God have mercy on her. She was a wonderful woman. Nobody understands why she insisted on going out by herself yesterday in her condition... or why she bought all those things."

He looked back at Sabah.

"Would you like to offer your condolences to her son?"

Without waiting for an answer, he lifted the chairs and hurried back toward the funeral tent, leaving her standing there alone.

The Informant

I've been an informer for as long as I can remember, and I'm not ashamed to admit it. Some people call me a spy. Others prefer traitor, snitch, or collaborator. They're a bitter lot, and I pay them no mind. I never cared what people chose to call me, so long as I ended up getting what I wanted.

For a while, I thought I'd finally outgrown that part of myself.

Then, during my first year at university, everything came rushing back.

One morning, I arrived on campus to find it in chaos. Student demonstrations had erupted across the university. Crowds of young men and women filled the courtyards while campus security hovered nearby, always eager to crush the slightest sign of protest. Chants echoed through the buildings, banners waved above the crowd, and the tension mounted by the minute.

Soon, the riot police arrived. They sealed every entrance and exit before descending on the students. Batons rose and fell without mercy. Thick clubs crashed onto backs and shoulders from every direction. The students stood their ground for a while, but eventually the relentless assault broke their resolve. Many fled in pain.

At the time, I happened to be in the office of one of the teaching assistants. Suddenly, a student burst through the door. Blood streamed down the side of his head. He was gasping for breath, his terrified eyes silently pleading for help. The teaching assistant hesitated only for a moment before hurriedly motioning him behind his large wooden desk.

A few seconds later, heavy boots thundered down the hallway. Someone kicked the office door open with brutal force. The teaching assistant rushed forward, trying to block their way.

"Have you seen any of the students who ran this way?" one of the officers demanded.

He calmly shook his head.

The policemen swept the room with suspicious eyes before turning to leave. From where I stood, I could see the student trembling behind the desk.

They were already at the doorway...

Then, without warning, I spoke.

I pointed straight toward his hiding place.

One of the officers shoved the teaching assistant aside so violently that he crashed to the floor before lunging at the student. The boy screamed as they grabbed him by his clothes and dragged him toward the door.

For one brief moment, he looked directly at me.

His face wasn't filled with anger.

Only confusion.

He simply couldn't understand why.

And then...

I smiled.

A broad smile spread across my face—a smile that somehow blended mockery with deep satisfaction. I had no idea where it came from, yet it felt strangely familiar, as though it had always been there, waiting for moments like this.

And with it came an overwhelming sense of relief I couldn't explain.

The student disappeared for a long time after that. The teaching assistant, meanwhile, was placed under investigation. I received nothing in return for what I'd done.

I didn't care.

The truth is, it wasn't anything new. I never really understood it, but it had been with me since childhood, as though I'd been born with it. It flowed through my veins.

My sister used to joke that I had entered the world as an informer. Oddly enough, I never found the remark insulting. From the moment I learned to speak, I reported everything she did to our father—or, more accurately, every mistake she made. Sometimes I'd trail behind her for hours, determined to catch her doing something wrong just so I could run to Father with the news, thrilled by my discovery. She was punished because of me more times than either of us could count.

School only expanded my field of work. Instead of informing on one person, I now had an entire classroom to observe. There were far more mistakes to uncover.

I still remember how the boys loved mimicking the teachers or inventing ridiculous nicknames for them. I'd laugh along with everyone else—sometimes I'd even contribute a joke of my own—then, at the first opportunity that wouldn't arouse suspicion, I'd quietly repeat every word to the teacher.

I'll never forget Kamal, my closest friend. One day, he nicknamed our Arabic teacher "Fat Dog." The teacher was enormously overweight, too heavy to leave his chair during class, yet strangely fond of beating students with a stick. The following lesson, the teacher called Kamal outside the classroom. Moments later, all we heard was the whistle of the cane slicing through the air, followed by Kamal's screams echoing down the corridor.

Of course, he never discovered who had betrayed him.

I comforted him afterward with the devotion of a loyal friend.

Then came our English exam.

I noticed Murad copying answers from Mahmoud, the brightest student in class. Mahmoud secretly wrote the answers on a tissue and slid it beneath the desks. One of the invigilators was chatting with a colleague at the front of the room. Neither noticed a thing. I called one of them over, pretending I had a question about the exam. As soon as he leaned down to hear me, I lowered my voice even further and discreetly pointed toward the two boys.

The invigilator said nothing. Instead, he casually walked a full lap around the classroom. He waited.

Then, the instant Murad pulled out the tissue to copy the answers...

he pounced.

A cheating report was written on the spot. For the first time in his life, Mahmoud failed an exam.

Afterward, I watched him collapse into tears, sobbing so violently that he nearly fainted. I looked at him...

and once again, that same smile crept across my face—the smile I'd spent years trying, and failing, to hide.

The habit faded for a while after I entered high school. I even believed I had finally outgrown it.

Then one afternoon, after classes, I went to my chemistry tutoring session and noticed that one of my classmates was absent. He had been skipping lessons more and more often lately. When I asked about him, the others laughed and told me he had stopped attending altogether, pocketing the tuition money his father gave him and spending his afternoons at a café with his friends instead.

An odd feeling settled inside me. A restlessness I couldn't shake. I kept asking around until I found his address. Then I went there without hesitation and knocked on the door.

His father answered.

I introduced myself politely as his son's friend and innocently asked if he was home.

"He should be at his chemistry lesson," his father replied.

I widened my eyes in feigned surprise.

"I've just come from chemistry," I said. "He wasn't there... actually, he hasn't been attending for quite some time."

I could easily imagine what happened after I left.

The boy disappeared from our lessons for a while. From then on, his father personally escorted him to every tutoring session. Of course, he eventually realized I had been the one who had told. He never forgave me. The next time our eyes met, that same involuntary smile spread across my face—a smile laced with mockery and quiet satisfaction.

And just like that, the strange unease inside me vanished.

The urge disappeared again...

Until university.

By then, I had become far more skilled.

Both the university administration and campus security knew me well. I became the trained eye that noticed everything students tried to conceal, and the attentive ear that caught conversations never meant to reach the authorities.

For a while, my role remained a secret. I was never paid. I received no special privileges or rewards. Yet I performed it with absolute dedication.

By my final year, everyone looked at me with unmistakable hatred and contempt.

I had grown accustomed to it.

Why did those fools despise me so much?

People committed foolish acts, then became furious when someone exposed them. Why commit the wrongdoing in the first place? How was I to blame for their poor choices? And why did they always condemn the one who revealed their mistakes instead of condemning the mistakes themselves?

Who truly deserved the blame?

That was the philosophy upon which I eventually built my life.

I wasn't a villain.

I was simply someone who helped people.

The more I exposed their mistakes, the less likely they were to repeat them—or, at the very least, the fear of being caught would make them think twice. One way or another, I was doing them a favor.

I graduated at the top of my class.

Without a single friend.

I started my first job, and my talent flourished.

Here, informing had value. It carried weight. It was the fastest route upward—the master key to promotions and to earning a place in the good graces of those above you.

No one there knew anything about my past.

So I began reporting everything.

Every conversation held behind closed doors.

Every careless remark made in a manager's absence.

Every complaint.

Every insult.

Every whispered criticism.

My first promotion came in record time.

It only sharpened my appetite.

I trained myself to record everything inside my mind—every word, every sigh, every muttered curse, every prayer uttered against someone—and, more importantly, to retrieve each one at precisely the right moment.

Strangely enough, despite having a remarkably poor memory in every other aspect of my life, I never had any trouble remembering things that belonged to other people.

Before long, I had earned quite a reputation among senior management. I became even more industrious. The workplace taught me that there were only two ways to win a superior's favor: flattery... or informing.

I had no talent for flattery.

In truth, I despised flatterers—the sort of people who climbed effortlessly without investing even a fraction of the effort I devoted to watching, listening, and remembering.

A series of bonuses rewarded what was officially called my "outstanding performance," and my financial situation improved considerably.

Then fate presented me with an opportunity I could never have anticipated.

It happened years ago, when the president of the company was approaching retirement and the top position suddenly became vacant. Vacancies of that magnitude were exceedingly rare. Two senior executives immediately locked horns over who deserved the chair. The entire company became engrossed in the rivalry.

Employees openly took sides, and private wagers circulated over who would ultimately prevail.

The competition grew increasingly bitter.

Then I intervened.

I had already chosen the side I intended to support. Not because I believed he was more capable. Not because I admired him. Simply because I worked under his rival. I knew too much about my former manager's secrets—his indiscretions, his compromises, the scandals carefully buried beneath years of polished respectability.

That was his misfortune.

Or perhaps it was simply fate that had placed me close enough to learn them.

I passed every secret to his competitor, who received each revelation with barely concealed delight. He used them masterfully. He won the position. My former manager disappeared almost overnight, retreating from the company after his scandals found their way into the open.

The new president drew me close.

He never forgot what I had done for him. The poor fool believed I had acted out of loyalty.

He never understood who I truly was.

One evening, he invited me to dinner at his home.

That was where I met his daughter.

From that night on, my life changed completely.

I fell in love with her the moment I saw her. She was graceful, gentle, and effortlessly beautiful. To my surprise, the feeling was mutual. Her father encouraged me to propose despite the obvious difference in our financial circumstances. I was nowhere near as wealthy as they were, but I was considered handsome, came from a respected family, and everyone insisted I had a brilliant future ahead of me. Most importantly, I had earned her father's complete trust.

The wedding followed soon afterward.

Marriage made me more powerful than ever. For the first time in my life, I felt almost untouchable.

Almost.

The only person I truly feared was my wife. Not merely because she possessed a fiery temper and acted before thinking. Nor because her father remained my superior at work. It was because my mother's illness had begun consuming a large portion of my salary, while my wife—thanks to the generous monthly allowance she received from her father—was now contributing significantly to our household expenses, allowing us to maintain the standard of living she had always known.

A year later, we had a beautiful son.

Motherhood absorbed most of her attention. And with her attention elsewhere, I found myself enjoying freedoms I had never known before. By then, I had become a well-connected man, both inside and outside the company. I moved comfortably through circles I had once only imagined existed.

New worlds opened before me.

With them came new pleasures—pleasures far more intoxicating than influence or informing.

The greatest of them was women.

It began innocently enough.

Female clients occasionally tried to charm me into granting them special treatment, while ambitious employees sought promotions through little more than professional courtesy. Over time, those encounters evolved into something else. My relationships multiplied, extending far beyond the workplace. At times, I found myself involved with more than one mistress simultaneously.

Years passed that way.

I took extraordinary care to conceal every trace of those affairs. Above all, I made certain my wife would never catch even the faintest scent of them.

And I succeeded.

Perhaps because I knew better than anyone how fiercely jealous she could be—and how catastrophic the consequences would be if the truth ever reached her. I understood perfectly well that every affair was a dangerous game.

Perhaps that danger was precisely what made it irresistible.

One morning, I woke feeling unusually refreshed. A message from my mistress was waiting for me, reminding me of our plans for that evening. Only then did I remember that I had an important business meeting scheduled for the very same time. I had no choice but to call her, postpone our rendezvous, and arrange to meet later at a different place.

As a rule, I never made such calls from home. I was far too cautious for that. But I had made sure my wife was in the bathroom, and my young son was sitting beside me, absorbed in his schoolwork.

That evening, after a thoroughly delightful night, I returned home to an unexpected sight.

My wife was waiting for me.

She was usually asleep by the time I came home. I greeted her with practiced innocence.

Without preamble, she asked me about the woman I had spent the evening with.

Instinctively, I slipped into the same expression of bewilderment and denial that had served me so well over the years. This wasn't the first time. Every now and then, she would be seized by bouts of suspicion, hurling accusations at me without evidence. And every time, I managed to convince her she had imagined it all, leaving her to drown in guilt for ever doubting me.

I was about to deny everything once again...

when she said something I never expected.

She knew my mistress's name.

She knew where we had met.

She even knew the exact time of our rendezvous.

She fell silent and simply stared at me, waiting.

Anger crackled in her eyes.

The shock robbed me of thought.

Had she been following me?

Had she hired someone to watch me?

How could she possibly know all those details?

Had someone betrayed me?

Dark clouds gathered across her face, and I knew all too well what they meant. One eruption of her temper could wash away everything I had built.

And if she knew this much...

...what else had she discovered?

For the first time in years, I couldn't lie.

I couldn't even speak.

I stood before her like a dry leaf caught in a storm, my eyes fixed on the floor, silently awaiting the tempest that would surely tear my life apart.

Then I noticed my son.

My five-year-old son.

Until that moment, I hadn't even realized he was standing there, directly behind his mother.

A wave of tenderness swept over me.

More than anything, I wished he didn't have to witness what was about to happen.

Yet despite everything unfolding before me, something about him caught my attention.

I looked more closely.

A peculiar smile had spread across his small, innocent face.

A smile woven from mockery...

and unmistakable schadenfreude.

It consumed almost his entire childish face.

It was a smile I knew...

all too well.

The Monster

I climbed the Great Pyramid with my hand clasped tightly in hers. The rest of the students followed behind us, with Mr. Abboud bringing up the rear.

The moment we reached the entrance, I stopped.

Completely.

The darkness beyond the opening made me freeze. My teacher noticed my hesitation. She tried to lead me forward, but I gently slipped my hand from hers and took a step back instead.

She looked at me in surprise.

Then she knelt until we were at eye level while I stared fearfully at the ground. Gently lifting my chin, she smiled and asked, in a calm, soothing voice, why I had stopped.

I hesitated, aware of the children behind me. Some had already begun to giggle.

Embarrassed, I admitted that I was afraid of the dark.

She laughed softly.

For a brief moment, she hugged me, then asked the rest of the class to continue inside with Mr. Abboud while she stayed behind with me.

She sat on a nearby rock, shielding her beautiful face from the blazing sun, and gently patted my cheek.

It was our school's field trip to the Pyramids.

I had been overjoyed when the trip was first announced. Only later did I discover that it was intended exclusively for fourth graders, while I was still in second grade. Watching my older brother prepare for the excursion filled me with sudden resentment. I had dreamed of visiting the pyramids and seeing the great statue everyone called the Sphinx.

Especially because my mathematics teacher sometimes nicknamed me "the Sphinx" whenever I sat perfectly still throughout the lesson, saying nothing despite always being one of the best students.

For an entire week, I barely slept. I cried. I complained. I turned life at home into misery because I couldn't bear the thought of being left behind. Everyone tried to convince me that I could go when I was older.

I refused to believe them.

Finally, my father surrendered. Ignoring my mother's objections, he went to the school himself and asked the administration to allow me to accompany my older brother as an exception.

I adored my father.

He spoiled me endlessly and somehow found a way to grant even my strangest wishes.

The principal happened to be his friend, so permission was given almost immediately. What made me even happier was learning that Miss Ahlam would be joining the trip.

I knew her well.

I loved her, and she loved me.

She had taught me in first grade before being transferred to teach the fourth graders that year. I wasn't her brightest student, but I always did well in class. I often took part in the morning assembly, and everyone said I had a gift—a beautiful voice. I memorized songs effortlessly and sang them confidently during the school's morning program.

Then I finally saw the Sphinx.

I had never imagined it would be so enormous. I couldn't understand why my teacher compared me to it when I looked nothing like such a gigantic creature.

I was even more astonished to discover that it had no nose.

Without thinking, I reached up and touched my own.

Soon afterward, we approached the Great Pyramid, where a guide welcomed us and began leading our tour inside.

I had no idea we were actually going to enter the pyramid. If I had known beforehand, I would never have insisted on coming. There couldn't possibly be light inside.

People always described me as brave. I wasn't afraid of street dogs or cats. Strangers never intimidated me. Standing before the entire school to sing during morning assembly didn't make me nervous. Even when a mouse once ran through our house, I didn't scream or leap onto the sofa the way my mother did.

But darkness...

Darkness was something entirely different.

Whenever I approached a dark place, terror seized me. I couldn't sleep at night unless I was curled up beside my mother or father. If the electricity went out, I screamed until the lights returned. Sometimes I'd run downstairs eagerly to play with my friends in front of our building. But if the entrance hallway was dark, I'd sit trembling on the steps until someone happened to come downstairs. Then I'd quickly follow them through the darkness. Sometimes I waited for hours, until all my friends grew tired and went home.

I never understood why darkness frightened me so much. Perhaps it was because of all the strange stories I'd heard growing up... or because of all the grotesque creatures adults used to threaten us with when we were children.

I could only imagine those creatures existing in the dark.

There, I saw them with perfect clarity.

I watched their hideous forms creeping toward me. Some had no legs at all, only grotesquely long arms. One of them frightened me more than all the others—a creature with a single enormous eye that stared straight at me while laughing maniacally, leaving my whole body paralyzed with fear. I could hear them moving through the darkness, whispering to one another as they pointed in my direction.

Their next victim.

The thought of what they might do if they caught me was almost enough to drive me mad. Even when I shut my eyes, I could still feel them surrounding me. I imagined their unnaturally long, bony fingers brushing through my hair, their filthy nails scraping lightly against my scalp. My entire body shivered whenever I sensed them nearby.

No one could protect me from them—not even my mother or father. They could slip past them effortlessly. The strangest part was that no one else could see them. Only I could. I never understood why. Whenever I described them exactly as they appeared to me, no one believed me.

Yet the moment the light returned, they vanished without a trace.

That was why my father had gotten into the habit of leaving the hallway light on all night. A sliver of its glow reached our bedroom, allowing me to sleep peacefully beside my parents, even though the light bothered him.

I came back to myself as my teacher gently asked why I was so reluctant to go inside. I told her everything. Every fear. She listened quietly, nodding from time to time, and when I finished, she smiled with complete understanding. I had known she would. She sat beside me and spoke with quiet confidence.

She didn't deny that the creatures existed. Had she done so, I would never have believed her. Nor did she insist that they were real. Instead, she simply told me that I was stronger than they were. Strong enough to defeat them.

Then she asked me something.

"If they're really as powerful as you believe," she said, "why haven't they taken you already? They've had plenty of chances."

I had no answer.

She smiled.

"They can't actually hurt anyone," she said. "They're no different from the villains you see on television. They can't climb out of the screen and harm you."

I trusted my teacher more than anyone.

Still...

I was frightened.

She fell silent for a moment, thinking. Then she asked me to close my eyes.

I obeyed immediately.

She told me to imagine something I had always wanted, or to picture somewhere beautiful—a place where I longed to be.

At first, nothing came.

Then, slowly, I saw it.

A vast garden bursting with flowers, playgrounds, and mountains of candy. My closest friends were there, laughing beside a large fountain whose cool mist drifted over us.

I described everything to her, and without realizing it, I found myself smiling.

For a moment, I imagined my mother and father standing beside me. Then I quickly erased them from my dream. It felt wonderful to run wherever I pleased and do whatever I wanted without anyone watching over me. I could eat as much candy as I liked without my mother reminding me to finish my homework.

I loved it.

When I opened my eyes again, I was genuinely happy. I excitedly told her all about my beautiful dream.

She gently patted my shoulder, delighted by what she had heard.

"You see?" she said softly. "That proves darkness isn't always a bad thing. When your eyes were closed, you couldn't see the light... but you were somewhere far more beautiful."

"And there weren't any monsters there, were there?"

I slowly shook my head.

She smiled again.

"You can always build a beautiful world inside your imagination," she told me. "A world that belongs only to you. A place where no one else is in control."

Then she gave me one final piece of advice.

"Whenever you're frightened," she said, "just close your eyes... and return to whatever beautiful place you wish."

Something inside me relaxed. The fear that had gripped me only moments before quietly melted away. Instead, I felt almost ashamed that I had been so afraid.

She took my hand once more and smiled.

"Are you ready to go inside the pyramid now?"

I hesitated...

Only for a moment.

Then, gathering every ounce of courage I had, I nodded.

"I'm not afraid of the dark anymore," I told her. "It isn't as frightening as I always thought."

And this time, still holding her hand, I walked into the pyramid beside her.

The rest of the students were waiting for us with the guide when we finally entered. The passage was narrow, but it was lit by several lamps, nowhere near as dark as I had imagined.

We ventured deeper inside.

After a while, the guide excused himself for a few moments, leaving us to wander on our own.

Miss Ahlam and I walked at the back of the group alongside Mr. Badawi. The older students carefully wrote down everything they saw; after all, this was primarily an educational trip, since they were studying the pyramids as part of their curriculum.

Time slipped by quickly despite the cramped corridors and stale air. We had gone far from the entrance and deep into the pyramid. I spotted one or two tourists—the

first I had ever seen—and found them rather amusing. About half an hour later, we prepared to leave.

Then, without warning, something happened.

The lights flickered once... twice... three times.

Everyone froze.

Then the entire pyramid was swallowed by darkness.

Mr. Badawi's voice echoed through the passage, ordering everyone to stay exactly where they were, but several children screamed anyway. Chaos erupted for a few moments before gradually subsiding. Fear had forced everyone to obey.

Some children began to cry.

Others struggled to breathe.

I could hear their rapid, panicked breaths all around me.

I reached out blindly and touched someone beside me.

The child shrieked in terror the instant my hand brushed against them.

Mr. Badawi kept reassuring us in a firm, steady voice. Somewhere in the distance, the guide shouted that there had been a power failure and that it would be fixed shortly. He repeated that we should remain where we were.

What a foolish thing to say.

Who would dare move in such absolute darkness?

It was darker than any darkness I had ever known. I couldn't even see my own fingers.

I reached out for Miss Ahlam, but she was no longer beside me. I had let go of her hand the instant the lights went out. She had probably gone to help Mr. Badawi.

Without her...

I suddenly felt helpless.

Fear began creeping back into me.

I saw that familiar eye again.

The creatures returned.

This time, blood dripped from both corners of its mouth, and new fangs gleamed beneath its grin. It floated toward me, raising its long, bony fingers.

I stumbled backward until my back struck the stone wall. Curling into myself, I covered my face.

It came closer.

I sat there trembling, surrendering completely.

No sound escaped my lips.

For several endless moments, I simply waited for it to devour me.

But...

It didn't.

Slowly, I lifted my head.

It was every bit as terrifying as before.

Yet somehow...

I realized it couldn't hurt me.

All it could do was frighten me.

Was Miss Ahlam right?

Was it truly that powerless?

For the first time, I doubted its ability to terrify me.

I closed my eyes.

I struggled to picture my favorite place.

For a few moments, nothing came.

Then, gradually, everything grew quiet.

Trees appeared first.

Then a little path.

Flowers blossomed everywhere.

I heard my friends laughing as they played happily through a beautiful garden. When I looked up, the sun was shining warmly above soft white clouds.

Without thinking, I began humming a song I'd recently memorized after seeing it on television more than twenty times.

The more I sang, the happier I became.

I ran through the garden, laughing.

This time, I jumped into the fountain, soaking my clothes.

For several minutes, I lived inside another world.

Now and then, a child's cry—or another frightened scream—drifted into it from somewhere far away.

I ignored them.

I kept playing.

Soon, I no longer felt the world around me.

Instead, I wondered why those silly children refused to enjoy this wonderful place with me instead of spoiling it with all their crying.

Without realizing it...

I smiled.

For a few precious moments, I disappeared into a world that belonged entirely to me.

Then a sudden movement pulled me back.

Had new monsters come?

No.

The lights had returned.

I blinked and looked around.

Most of the children were sitting on the floor.

Others were pressed tightly against the walls, terror still written across their faces.

As soon as the electricity came back, everyone scrambled to their feet.

Some laughed with relief.

Others wiped tears from their cheeks.

Mr. Badawi quickly lined everyone up in two rows so we could leave the pyramid.

I searched for my brother.

He was staring at me in bewilderment.

Only then did I realize that throughout the entire ordeal I had been smiling...

softly humming my favorite song aloud.

The guide hurried back and led everyone toward the exit.

But...

Where was Miss Ahlam?

For a moment, everyone had forgotten about her.

She had been beside me when the lights went out.

I looked around desperately.

In a dark corner, a figure sat a few meters away.

Unlike everyone else, it wasn't moving toward the exit.

I called the guide.

We approached cautiously.

He shone his flashlight toward the figure.

A woman.

Her clothes made that much clear, though most of her face was hidden.

Perhaps a terrified tourist.

She sat on the floor with her knees pulled tightly against her chest, her arms wrapped around her legs, staring at us in horror as the beam remained fixed on her.

Her teeth chattered violently.

Her whole body shook uncontrollably.

She kept glancing fearfully into the darkness, shielding her face as though invisible creatures surrounded her.

We stopped only a few steps away.

Then she lifted her eyes—

not toward us...

but toward something hidden in the darkness behind us.

The terror in her face was real.

As though whatever she saw was about to attack.

And then...

I recognized her.

It was her.

Not a tourist.

But my beloved teacher,

Miss Ahlam.

Frozen in absolute terror.

The Role

I asked my actor friend, “What is the strangest thing that has ever happened to you?”

The question sprang into my mind without warning and slipped out before I could think. He fell silent for a moment, drifting through old memories. We were exchanging strange stories, the same old circle of friends—myself and three others—gathered once again at his house after a long time. He drew deeply on the hookah resting before him, then said quietly:

“Well... many years ago, I was nothing more than an obscure actor. No one had ever heard of me. I lived then in a crumbling old apartment owned by a young widow. I still remember her perfectly.”

He paused, a clear, wistful smile spreading across his face before he continued.

“I've traveled the world and met more women than I can count. You know my life—more affairs than I could ever remember. Because of my work, I met the most beautiful actresses, performers, and models. But never—not once—did I meet anyone who could rival her beauty. It was the kind of beauty a person encounters only once in a lifetime. Even today, I remember her as though her face had been painted onto the walls of my memory in colors that could never fade. Sometimes, when I'm performing a romantic scene, I picture only her before me. My emotions flow effortlessly, and I perform the role with a sincerity I've never been able to summon otherwise.”

“To that extent?” I asked in astonishment.

“Absolutely,”

he replied, straightening in his seat.

“How could I even begin to describe her? A rare, God-given beauty. The sort of perfection you couldn't create even in your imagination. If you had seen her yourself, you'd understand how hopelessly inadequate my words are. She was young—not yet twenty-three. She married a man old enough to be her father. A wealthy merchant from the city saw her while visiting her village and became captivated. Her father was a poor farmer, burdened with ten children. When the old man proposed immediately, her father could scarcely contain his joy. She married him, even though he already had another wife and sons older—and taller—than she was. He brought her to the city and settled her in an old house, far away from his first family. Two

years later, he died, leaving her the house in his will. Naturally, that sparked a bitter dispute with his children.

“I rented an apartment in that house. At first, I rarely saw her. I always returned from the theater late at night. But eventually, I began watching for her, looking for excuses to get closer after realizing just how lonely she was. I seized every opportunity to speak with her. I plotted and schemed to make her fall for me as though my life depended on it. Weeks passed, and we gradually grew close, yet somehow, I still couldn't draw her into my net... though I waited impatiently for that chance. Of course, I never told her I was an unsuccessful actor.”

“One night, I returned home very late. A friend had invited me to a private gathering. I accepted, even though I'd abandoned those wild nights some time before. At the entrance to the building, I noticed Eid the beggar, wrapped in an old blanket and shivering from the cold.

“I usually cursed him whenever he appeared like some ghost at the doorway while I staggered home after midnight. Sometimes, I'd even shove him aside with my foot. But that night... for reasons I still don't understand... I felt sorry for him. I searched my wallet, took out half the little money I had, and offered it to him.

“He looked up to see who was showing him kindness while murmuring a prayer of gratitude. The moment he recognized me, terror filled his face. He scrambled backward, trying to get away from me. I laid the money beside him, reassuring him gently, then climbed the stairs while he continued staring after me in bewilderment.

“I went inside, threw myself into the nearest chair, and sank into a deep sleep. Suddenly, I was awakened by knocking at the door. At first, I thought I was imagining it. I closed my eyes again, but the knocking returned—a soft knock, so gentle you'd think it was a little child.

“I dragged myself to the door, wondering who could possibly come so late. I opened it with a yawn. The instant I saw her standing there, every trace of sleep vanished. The hashish, the alcohol—everything evaporated in a heartbeat.

“It was her.

“I couldn't believe my eyes. She wore a long woolen house dress with a heavy black shawl draped over her shoulders. She breathed warm air into her hands against the cold, glancing nervously around the hallway. For all my experience with women, I lost my composure. For several seconds, I had no idea what to do. She noticed my

confusion and stepped back apologetically, saying she was sorry for disturbing me so late."

"She quickly explained why she'd come. There was a plumbing problem in my bathroom, and water was leaking into the apartment below. She said she'd brought a plumber several times, but I was never home. Hesitantly, she asked whether I could leave her a spare key so the plumber could come in next time. She stepped back and waited for my answer.

"I immediately convinced myself it was merely an excuse to see me. She could easily have waited until morning. I recovered my composure and decided not to waste the opportunity. I opened the door wider and invited her inside while I searched for the spare key, which I always seemed to misplace. She hesitated for a few moments. It was freezing outside, and she clutched the shawl tightly around herself. Finally, she stepped inside but remained just behind the door. I gestured toward a chair in the sitting room. When she saw that I wasn't going to relent, she finally sat down.

"The moment she did, I quietly closed the door behind her."

She perched on the edge of the chair, her eyes wandering around the room. I pretended to look for the spare key—which, truth be told, I genuinely could never remember where I'd left. Quietly, I nudged an empty beer bottle that had been carelessly abandoned in the middle of the sitting room behind the chair, then hurried into the kitchen after offering to make her a cup of tea.

She declined at first, but I insisted. To be honest, I was the one who needed the tea to clear my head. When I returned, she was holding the cup in both hands without drinking from it, drawing warmth from it more than anything else.

We exchanged a few words at first—ordinary conversation about the house and the neighbors. She answered cautiously. Then, after a brief silence, she surprised me by asking,

"Are you an actor?"

I laughed softly.

"Well... supporting roles."

Her eyes lit up. A spontaneous smile blossomed across her face.

“I absolutely love acting,” she said eagerly. “I've always dreamed of becoming an actress. Back in my village, I'd never seen a single film because we didn't even own a television. But after I came here, I watched so many. God rest his soul, my husband took me to the cinema only once... though I've never seen any of your films.”

She spoke that last sentence shyly, then fell silent for a moment.

I explained that I was a stage actor and had never really had any noteworthy roles in the cinema. She nodded in understanding.

After that, we talked—or rather, she talked while I listened. I let her empty her heart. I'd always believed a woman's greatest flaw was her tongue—that the moment she began speaking, she lost half her beauty.

She was different.

A hundred times more beautiful while she spoke.

She told stories with the innocence of a little girl. She laughed unconsciously whenever she remembered something amusing. Whenever her troubles surfaced, she instinctively lowered her eyes, as though afraid of them. Her hands danced constantly as she spoke, completing what her words began.

Had you seen her, you would have felt as though you were standing before a masterpiece.

Everything about her was captivating.

Her voice.

Her expressions.

Her effortless grace.

I rested my head against my hand and simply admired the harmony of that perfect symphony, never interrupting her, even though most of what she spoke about was sorrow.

She told me about her husband, who had died after leaving her the old house in his will. But his children from his first marriage continued to threaten her. They had

filed a lawsuit, claiming their father had not been of sound mind when he signed the will.

“If they win,” she said quietly, “I'll end up on the street... especially now that my father is gone.”

The sadness in her voice was unmistakable. I saw tears glistening in her eyes.

She was the last person in the world who belonged in conflict.

She couldn't understand why her husband's children hated her so much. Sometimes, she confessed, she wished she could simply abandon the house, leave it all to them, and disappear somewhere far away.

Her husband had also left her some gold and money—enough to start a new life elsewhere. But she was terrified of taking such a step. She knew nothing of the world. Her entire life had existed between her father's house and her husband’s.

Time slipped away without my noticing. Eventually, she lowered her gaze shyly and apologized for talking so much. Then she asked me about the theater... about acting. I noticed she'd loosened the shawl from around her shoulders now that she'd begun to feel more at ease.

I handed her an old newspaper containing a photograph of me beside a well-known actor in the play I was performing at the time. Naturally, she didn't recognize me. I was dressed as an elderly religious scholar. The moment she saw the photograph, she looked up excitedly.

“What role do you play?”

At that time, I was standing at the true beginning of my career. For the first time in my life, I'd been given a substantial role. Technically, it was still a supporting part, but it was central to the story, and its success became the first step toward the recognition I would later achieve.

I played a courageous scholar who defied a tyrannical ruler and died a martyr defending his beliefs—a famous historical figure.

Don't laugh.

I know exactly what you're thinking.

A wolf dressed as a holy man.

The irony wasn't lost on me. Yet it was the greatest role I'd ever played after years of struggling in the theater.

I immersed myself in the character. I read everything I could find about him. I collected every book and reference that told his story. I discovered that he had been a remarkable scholar I'd never even heard of before.

His knowledge fascinated me. His convictions earned my respect. Reading about his courage and unwavering principles filled me with admiration.

I threw myself into preparation. Every day, I stood before the mirror, determined to perfect the role. I rehearsed the scenes again and again. I spent countless hours in rehearsal until I knew nearly every line by heart and no longer needed a prompter.

He suddenly laughed.

“Ah, if only you'd seen me in that white galabeya and flowing cloak... the turban... the black beard streaked with white. No one could recognize me. Even the director, the first time he saw me in costume, burst out laughing and shouted, ‘Anyone who sees you now would swear you're a pious sheikh. They'd never imagine you're a drunk and a womanizer.’ Still, he was completely convinced by my performance.

“I went to sleep every night dreaming about that role and woke up rehearsing it. Every word. Every expression. Every gesture. Every movement. They say that sometimes an actor becomes so immersed in a role that he forgets himself. He lives the character... breathes it... inhabits it with every fiber of his being, until it begins to reshape who he is beyond the stage.

“I remember an actor in our troupe who played a king for so long that whenever he got drunk and someone annoyed him, he'd imagine we were his royal guards and point at the poor fellow, shouting, ‘Kill this scoundrel!’ And there was an actress who genuinely wept whenever her son died in one particular scene. Those weren't stage tears—they were real.

“I'd never experienced that kind of immersion before. I'd usually leave the theater, forget everything, and think of nothing except women and cigarettes. But with that role, I finally understood what it meant. It affected my life in ways I never expected.

“Two months after the play opened, I realized I'd drifted away from my late-night escapades. I no longer smoked as heavily as before. I even found myself drawn to religious books, despite never having read a single book of that kind before—apart from the references I'd gathered for the role.

“Of course, I didn't tell her any of that. I simply shared a few amusing stories from backstage. She smiled as she listened, never interrupting me. Then we spoke about our ambitions... our dreams. We laughed often.

Time slipped by once again without either of us noticing.

Eventually, a brief silence settled between us.

I noticed her wrapping the shawl tightly around her shoulders again. The cold was growing harsher. I knew she was preparing to leave. I can't let this chance slip away, I thought. If she walks out now, I'll go mad.

My mind raced.

I excused myself for a moment, then returned carrying a photo album I treasured dearly, filled with pictures of me on stage. It was obvious she truly loved the theater. As I turned the pages, she leaned closer with the eager excitement of a child. She laughed at the photographs, commenting on each one and pointing out every famous actor she recognized.

I quickly moved beside her.

I slipped an arm around her shoulders as naturally as I could while pointing to each photograph and telling the story behind it. I recounted countless amusing incidents and backstage mishaps from the theater.

She asked whether I thought she had what it took to become an actress.

I answered confidently that she'd make a wonderful one.

Sensing that she'd grown more comfortable around me, I went into the kitchen and returned with a few cans of beer. I handed one to her. She looked at it with surprise and uncertainty. I laughed and joked that every great actress drank beer.

"Besides," I added, "you never touched the tea I made, and I'd hate my guests to think I was stingy."

Before she could refuse, I'd already popped the can open.

A little spilled onto her clothes.

She examined the can with cautious curiosity before taking a hesitant sip while I continued encouraging her.

Within moments, a rosy flush climbed into her cheeks.

She sank deeper into the chair, still studying the photographs and asking about each one.

I wrapped my arm completely around her.

After the beer—which I neglected to mention was unusually strong—her speech became just a little slower. I admired the softness of her hair. I gently slipped the shawl from her shoulders.

She didn't object.

I began running my fingers through her hair. I leaned closer until we were pressed together. She closed her eyes in surrender. I felt a faint shiver pass through her body as I embraced her.

I kissed her softly on the cheek while her breathing quickened. Then I covered her neck and hand with warmer kisses. She offered no resistance.

My experience told me she'd been deprived of tenderness for a very long time.

She melted into my arms.

I took her hand and led her toward the bedroom. She followed without resisting.

My friend stopped there.

He lit a cigarette and exhaled slowly, almost nervously. I let him finish without interrupting. He crushed it into the ashtray with unnecessary force. Unable to contain myself, I asked,

"What happened next?"

He frowned.

"Nothing.

That's the strange part.

It was something I'd never imagined. At last, the woman I'd spent weeks pursuing was in my arms... completely surrendered. And right in the middle of it all, something inside me shifted. I can't explain where it came from.

An uneasiness.

A growing discomfort. A feeling that crept quietly but relentlessly into my soul. I suddenly despised what I was doing. You probably won't believe me... but that's exactly what happened”

"I'd only just begun surrendering to desire when my eyes fell upon one of the books I'd bought about the scholar whose role I was playing. A painful sense of shame washed over me. I shoved the book beneath the bed, but my thoughts refused to let it go. They rebelled against me. I tried to ignore them—to push them aside and return to that moment of pleasure—but my mind kept returning to him.

"For three months I'd been portraying that man. Absorbing his ideas. Speaking his words. Living his convictions. Expressing everything he believed. Until, somehow, he'd become a part of me that refused to disappear, even after I left the stage. Only a few hours earlier I'd been standing beneath the theater lights, speaking about truth... virtue... courage. And now here I was, in the arms of another man's widow. The contrast was unbearable.

"A strange battle erupted inside me. One part of me was weak, surrendering to desire. The other stood firm, ready to face the entire world alone for the sake of a single truth. Then another conflict ignited—between right and wrong. I struggled to silence it. And when I finally succeeded... I realized I'd extinguished my desire as well.

"I came to my senses. I woke up. And when I did, I was no longer that obscure actor. I desperately wanted to become my old self again—that reckless fool—but I couldn't. Instead, there stood inside me the image of an unyielding scholar, prepared to confront the whole world for the sake of his principles. A man who would never surrender to temptation.

"I looked at the woman beside me. Suddenly I no longer noticed how beautiful she was. I stepped away. She sensed the change immediately. I'd stopped touching her. The warmth had left me. She asked what was wrong. What I'll never forget is this—

I grabbed her firmly by the hand and pulled her to her feet. We walked out of the bedroom. I pointed toward the door. I was throwing her out.

"She stood frozen in disbelief for several seconds. When she realized I was completely serious, she hurriedly gathered her things. Anger flashed across her face. She rushed toward the door after I told her never to come back. I threw it wide open.

"Just before leaving, she glanced at the empty beer cans scattered carelessly around the room. She looked at me with contempt and said,

'You play the respectable man... but you're nothing more than a drunken scoundrel. This is the first time I've ever allowed a strange man to touch me... and that mistake will never happen again.'

"She walked out and slammed the door behind her. I didn't sleep that night. I stayed awake until morning, thinking. And for the first time in my life... I felt completely at peace. I knew I'd done the right thing."

He paused for a moment to light another cigarette before continuing.

"After that, I deliberately started coming home late. Two days later, I heard that her late husband's children had won the lawsuit against her. They'd hired thugs to throw her out of the house and dump all her belongings into the street. I learned that no one had dared stand by her or even help her, afraid of crossing her stepchildren.

"I asked about her. But she'd vanished. Completely vanished.

"I buried myself in my work. Not long afterward, a prominent theater critic wrote about my performance, praising my role. He said I was among the finest actors he'd ever seen when it came to completely inhabiting a character.

"Perhaps that sense of complete immersion was the reason behind my later fame... the secret behind my success in every role that followed. Soon afterward I was offered an even larger part. I succeeded again. And that was the beginning of my journey toward fame.

"I left that old house and moved somewhere else. My work consumed me, as did the glittering world of celebrity whose doors had finally begun to open before me.

"Years passed. Eventually I became a star everyone knew by name. But I never forgot her. Not for a single day. The memory of that night never faded from my

fragile mind. For years I searched for her without success. I looked everywhere. Far more than you can imagine.

"Today I'd gladly give up half my life—and every penny I own—just to see her one more time. To feel her presence again. To see her smile. To hold her soft, fair hand once more. Whenever that night returns to me, I sometimes feel an overwhelming sense of regret. I let slip a chance that comes only once in a lifetime—a woman like her is someone you meet only once.

"But believe me... at that moment I was in a strange state. At peace with myself. At peace with everything around me. And I truly believed I'd done the right thing."

He fell silent. I seized the opportunity to ask,

"If you could go back to that night... would you take the opportunity this time?"

He shook his head.

"I don't think it would have changed anything. As I told you, I was in a very unusual state then. A state of complete clarity. A strange reconciliation with myself. I changed enormously during that period. For a while, I became a different man."

I looked at him in surprise.

"Why not?"

He laughed naturally before replying,

"Because the play came to an end...

"And the very next role I was given was that of a notorious criminal—

a thug...

and a pimp."

The Car

He was the first man in our village to buy a car.

Before that, we walked everywhere or relied on donkeys and carts to get around. Only one vehicle came through the village regularly every morning: an old, battered truck that had originally served as a military transport. Its owner, Abboud, had bought it as army surplus and enclosed the open cargo bed, turning it into a crude passenger compartment meant for six people, though he usually squeezed in ten.

The truck made several trips a day, carrying villagers to the district town where they went for hospital treatment, government paperwork, or shopping—services our remote village simply didn't have. The journey took half an hour, during which you sat hunched over, listening to your bones rattle with every pothole. You had to cling tightly to your seat or risk being thrown into the air whenever the truck lurched around a sharp bend.

My mother says I'm a spiteful man.

She knows me well.

I admit she's right. But I'd convinced myself I'd cured that flaw long ago...

Until Mahmoud bought his car.

Mahmoud was my cousin.

We had each inherited our houses from our fathers, and the two homes stood side by side. We grew up together and attended the village's only school before our paths finally diverged. He continued his education while I devoted myself to farming.

His inheritance had included only a small plot of land, so he chose office work instead, leaving the farming to his younger brother. I, on the other hand, inherited a vast estate. Every day I worked my fields and supervised every detail. Each morning we woke at the same time. I headed for the fields. He waited for Abboud's truck to take him to his accounting job at a large company in the city.

Fate seemed determined to bind our lives together. Even when we married, we each chose one of two sisters, and our weddings took place in the same year.

Perhaps I would never have envied him if he hadn't lived next door.

I remember the day he drove into the village with his car.

It was an event unlike anything our humble village had ever seen. The car wound slowly through the narrow alleys as curious faces appeared in windows and on rooftops to watch it pass. Children raced after it, scrambling onto its gleaming body until Mahmoud laughed and gently shooed them away.

Even the village mayor came to inspect the car that had instantly become the talk of the village. Later I learned that Mahmoud had sold part of his land to his younger brother to afford it.

From that day on...

His life changed.

And so did mine.

Before Mahmoud bought that car, I had always been the envy of the village. People looked at me as the example everyone wished they could become. Despite my youth, I owned the largest farmland in the village—even larger than the mayor's. My harvests were always the finest because I worked the land myself and used the best fertilizers. My house was, without question, the biggest in the village.

That was the one arena in which no one could rival me. Not even the educated Mahmoud. Everyone envied me. True, I disliked being envied... but I loved being the center of everyone's attention.

It made me happy.

Then everything changed the day Mahmoud bought his car.

Thanks to it, he became the village's unofficial leader. Every morning, as he left for work, someone would inevitably ask for a ride into town. Mahmoud was too kind to refuse anyone—a complete opposite of me, for I had never been burdened by such shyness. He drove the sick to the hospital. He carried people's heavy belongings from one place to another. Whenever there was a wedding, he volunteered his car to escort the bride and groom, decorating it beautifully for the occasion. Sometimes he even helped transport the bride's furniture to her new home. Before long, there wasn't a single household in the village that hadn't, at one time or another, needed Mahmoud's help. Everyone owed him a favor.

His standing in the village rose rapidly... while mine quietly faded.

People stood up when he approached. They greeted him warmly. No one spoke before he did. Even the village mayor befriended him, often relying on him whenever an urgent trip to town became necessary.

I won't deny that I felt a twinge of envy at first. But I ignored it and tried not to dwell on it.

Then a series of incidents shattered what little peace remained inside me.

It started one morning when I noticed my wife standing at the window, watching intently as her sister, Mahmoud, and their children loaded the car with bags and supplies before driving away. We later learned they were spending the day with relatives in a nearby coastal town, escaping the suffocating summer heat that hung over our village.

The envy on my wife's beautiful face was impossible to miss. I remembered the last time we'd made that same trip. First, we had to travel to the district town, then wait endlessly to hire another car to the coastal city, then yet another vehicle to our relatives' house, and finally one more to the beach. We spent hours changing transportation, arrived utterly exhausted, and felt as though our ribs had been crushed beneath the weight of our luggage.

After that, it became an everyday sight to watch Mahmoud driving his children to the village school while our only daughter trudged through the mud beside the maid on her way to the Qur'an school. During holidays, Mahmoud took his family into the city for outings, while we usually stayed home because transportation became nearly impossible at those times.

But the incident that finally broke the camel's back came when the two sisters decided to visit their sick uncle in the city. I hired Abboud's truck for the entire fare so that no other passengers would ride with us. We packed gifts and carefully prepared homemade food for our uncle.

Abboud arrived late. When we finally set off, the truck lurched so violently it felt as though we were trapped inside a whirling Sufi dance. Then, to make matters worse, it broke down halfway through the journey. For two hours we stood beneath the blazing sun, praying another vehicle might pass. When one finally did, it was only a pickup truck. We climbed into the open back, where the scorching wind lashed our

faces. By the time we reached the city, close to noon, we were panting with exhaustion.

Then came the final disaster.

The gifts we'd struggled to carry had been tossed around so violently that everything inside had spilled and mixed together. Meanwhile, Mahmoud and his wife had arrived early that morning, rested, comfortable, and without the slightest inconvenience.

When it was time to return home, my wife—who was pregnant—could barely move. She had no choice but to ride back with her sister in Mahmoud's car. I pretended I had business to attend to in the city so I wouldn't have to sit in his vehicle. Instead, I returned to the village alone later that evening, completely worn out.

That entire night my wife couldn't stop talking about Mahmoud's car. She described how she'd sat in the back seat like a queen, how soft and comfortable it was, how spacious the trunk was, and how effortlessly it held all their belongings. She spoke about the smooth ride and how much she'd enjoyed simply gazing out the window along the way.

For two days she dropped hints. When I ignored them, the hints turned into complaints. Finally, she asked me outright to buy a car ourselves.

"We're no less than anyone else," she said.

But I couldn't agree. Harvest season hadn't arrived yet, and every pound I earned was going toward buying another piece of land. I had no money left.

And even if I had...

I didn't know the first thing about driving.

The truth was, I was afraid of it.

I tried to explain all this to her again and again, but she refused to accept it. For the sake of her health, I eventually stopped arguing. I didn't want another quarrel that would exhaust me... and upset her.

She was gentle by nature.

But she was also stubborn. And when jealousy takes hold of a woman, she becomes someone else entirely—someone almost impossible to stop.

She knew my weakness.

Not only because I loved her, but because of her difficult pregnancy.

I remembered the day we got married. I'm not ashamed to admit that Mahmoud was the reason.

When he became engaged, everyone in the village talked about what an excellent match he'd made and how beautiful his fiancée was. Soon afterward I learned that she had a younger sister...

An even more beautiful one.

I didn't hesitate. Just two days later, I asked for her hand in marriage.

Yes...

I did that.

I'd never even seen her before. But the moment I laid eyes on her... I became a different man.

Until then, my entire life had revolved around farmland and the grain warehouses I owned. My heart had room for nothing except wealth and influence. I'd never imagined it could hold love.

But I fell hopelessly in love with her.

And, in time, she loved me just as deeply.

Even now, I can't imagine what my life was like before her, nor can I imagine living without her. I worried about her constantly and tried to make her happy in every possible way. She did the same for me. She stayed up caring for me, did everything she could to make me happy, rose before me every morning just to walk me to the front gate with a loving farewell. That single moment gave me enough strength to face the day's hardships.

When I returned home, she helped me change my clothes, kept the house spotless, and cared for my sick mother without ever being asked.

A year after our marriage, she gave birth to our daughter. I adored that little girl. But the pregnancy took a heavy toll on my wife's frail body. She conceived twice afterward... and lost both pregnancies. For four long years, she couldn't conceive again.

My mother and relatives pressured me relentlessly to take a second wife—someone who could bear me a son to carry my name.

One night, she came to me in tears, begging me to marry again because she feared she'd never have another child.

I was furious.

I refused even to discuss it.

I didn't want a son if having him meant losing her. No other woman could ever take her place...

Not even one who gave me a thousand children.

We visited doctor after doctor without success. Then, after years of disappointment... she finally became pregnant again. This time, the doctor's instructions were strict. She had to avoid every form of physical strain. Any exertion could endanger not only the baby, but her own life as well.

I hired a maid to help her and scolded my wife whenever she tried to do even the smallest chore around the house. Yet every morning she still insisted on walking me to the front gate. By the seventh month, when the pregnancy had become especially difficult, she leaned against the walls just to make it that far.

I never left until I'd filled my eyes with the sight of her face. Only then would I wake the maid to look after her.

I won't deny that my wife's words awakened something inside me—

something I'd thought had died years ago.

A strange feeling that had haunted me since childhood. I never truly understood it, but it was tied to my desperate need to always be the best. My mother called it envy. At first, I didn't understand what she meant.

I first felt it during my early school years. One day, a classmate brought a beautiful fountain pen with a golden body. We were all mesmerized as the light danced across its surface.

That was the first time I felt it.

I was too weak to fight it.

I waited until recess, slipped quietly back into the classroom, took the pen from my classmate's schoolbag after watching where he'd hidden it...

I didn't steal it.

I didn't even want it.

I simply snapped it in half... Then threw it over the school wall.

Afterward...

I felt relieved.

It became a habit. Whenever someone wore new clothes, I'd deliberately spill ink on them. Or I'd invite him to play football with us, then grab his shirt during the game—making it look accidental—until I tore it badly.

Things like that happened again and again. As I grew older, that cursed feeling faded. I thought I'd finally rid myself of it.

Until it returned once more.

That night my wife and I argued.

She brought up the car again. For the first time in our marriage, she called me a coward...

And a miser.

I lost my temper. I shouted at her and stormed out of the house despite the bitter cold. In truth, I was already planning to spend the night guarding my grain

warehouse. After the harvest, I often slept there. I grabbed my father's old shotgun and stepped outside.

For the first time ever...

She didn't come to see me off.

No matter how angry she'd ever been, she'd never failed to do that.

I walked through the dark street, bitter and resentful. Then I saw Mahmoud's car. It was blocking the entrance to the lane. He usually parked it in front of his own house, but lately I'd made a point of pouring buckets of water there until the ground became one large muddy puddle.

I didn't want to see his car parked in front of my home. The sight of it brought back our argument... And every quarrel we'd had in recent months.

My blood boiled.

That cursed piece of metal was the cause of it all.

The old feeling surged through me with terrifying force. I'd suppressed it for years.

Now it burst free.

I walked toward the car.

In a fit of rage, I kicked the side of it as hard as I could. The loud metallic clang startled me. I froze, then instinctively stepped back, afraid Mahmoud—or one of the neighbors—had heard it. For several long seconds I stood perfectly still.

Nothing.

No movement.

The windows remained dark. The whole village lay silent beneath the bitter winter night, everyone safely tucked beneath their blankets.

I grew bolder.

A mad idea slipped effortlessly into my mind. I stared at the car with hatred. For one glorious instant, I imagined its metal body smashed flat against the ground.

I smiled.

Then reality returned. Destroying it wasn't possible.

But a little damage...

That would do.

I looked around carefully before crouching beside the front tire. From my pocket I took the thin wire I used to clean my old shotgun. With all the resentment bottled inside me, I drove it deep into the rubber. I stood there, savoring the hiss as the air escaped.

Then I moved to another tire. This time it took even less effort.

Again, I glanced around.

The village was still asleep. Silence ruled the night. I stood looking at the crippled car, a strange calm settling over me.

He'd think a nail...

Or a sharp stone...

had punctured the tires.

It wouldn't be the first time. The rough village roads were littered with things like that. Replacing those tires would cost him both money and trouble.

Satisfied, I resumed my walk toward the warehouse at the edge of the village.

My anger had evaporated. For the first time that night...

I felt at peace.

As I walked the familiar half-hour road, I softly hummed an old folk tune I loved, letting it carry me through the darkness.

I never knew that, in the middle of that same night, my wife suddenly fell ill.

She called for the maid, who rushed to her immediately. She was screaming in pain. The maid ran next door to wake my wife's sister, who quickly realized that labor had

begun. Mahmoud hurried to fetch the village midwife, who lived only a few houses away, only to discover that she had traveled to a neighboring village for another unexpected delivery.

My wife lay helplessly on the bed, sweat pouring from her body as violent contractions wracked her, leaving her struggling to breathe. Her face had turned pale and drawn. The doctor had warned us that her pregnancy was fragile and that she would require surgery when the time came to give birth. But even he could never have foreseen that fate would bring on labor in the seventh month.

My wife's sister burst into tears as she watched the color of life slowly drain from the face of her only sister. Mahmoud suggested taking her to the city hospital immediately. They wrapped a heavy cloak around my wife, covered her with several blankets, and, supported by the maid and her sister, she struggled toward the front door.

The commotion awakened some of the neighbors. Women gathered helplessly in their doorways, watching her condition with growing horror.

Exhausted, my wife staggered into the street. She sank into the back seat of the car, one trembling hand resting weakly against her swollen belly. She didn't realize she had begun to bleed. A thin stream of blood slowly spread beneath her.

Mahmoud turned the ignition.

The car lurched forward only a few yards before it began moving awkwardly and unevenly. He climbed out and discovered that one of the tires was flat. As he hurried to replace it, he found that another tire had been punctured as well.

He stood there helplessly. Then pounded his fist against the car in despair.

My wife's sister burst into tears when he quietly told her what had happened. He looked with pity at the poor woman inside the car, trapped by her own fate. Desperately, he searched for a solution. His head slowly dropped in helplessness.

And then...

My wife's scream ripped through the silence of the night.

The steady flow of blood only grew heavier.

A Failed Suicide

He tightened the rope securely around the large ceiling fan hanging in the center of his tiny room. He tested it carefully to make sure it could bear his weight. At the other end, he tied a firm noose and slipped his hand through it. Satisfied, he let it fall, watching it sway gently in the empty room. He stepped down from the chair, walked back a few paces, and gave everything one last look.

Everything was ready now.

All that remained was the moment of carrying out his mad plan. His eyes settled on the rope hanging from the ceiling. He closed his eyes in bitterness.

Just a few more seconds...

and it would all be over.

He had exhausted every option. There was no road left wide enough for his footsteps except the road to death. Life had become a burden too heavy to carry. He had tried again and again, yet failure clung stubbornly to every step he took in search of a better life. Circumstances and fate seemed determined to drag him back to the very place he had started, no matter how far he struggled.

The blows of life had overturned his cart. The world had closed in around him, and the only hand still reaching toward him seemed to be the hand of death.

And yet...

Though his decision had been made, an overwhelming unease still gripped him.

He collapsed onto the edge of his bed, trying to gather a courage that was slipping away. This wasn't an impulsive decision or the product of some passing emotion. He had thought about it for a long time—long enough to become strangely comfortable with a choice he had never imagined his own mind would one day permit. Never in his life had he possessed enough courage to make a decision of such weight. Ironically, it was failure that had finally given him that courage.

His endless defeats had left him with only one escape that still resembled success: withdrawing from life itself. He had fought a long, exhausting war against reality and, as always, emerged wounded. He no longer possessed the strength to prepare for another battle in pursuit of a victory he knew would never come. Nor did he have

the patience to continue living beneath wounds that time—and people's cruel tongues—only made deeper.

Like everyone else, he had dreams. Nothing grand. Nothing ambitious enough to provoke fate.

Just small ones...

Dreams as modest as his luck in this world. And, he admitted to himself, as modest as his talents.

People called him careless. Lazy. Idle. Those words had echoed in his ears for years. He never denied them. They were bullets fired into his already fragile reputation—accusations everyone hurled at him, accusations he could never honestly refute.

He knew he possessed every one of those flaws... perhaps even more. They had taken root inside him since childhood, and only much later did he understand how merciless they truly were. Only his mother had ever stood by him. She convinced herself—and tried to convince him—that it was simply bad luck. But perhaps luck was innocent.

He knew he really was lazy. He knew people, harsh as they were, weren't entirely wrong. He had never succeeded at any job. He had stumbled through his education. Time and again he tried to rebel against himself—to tear down the person he had become and build someone new. He struggled to weave fresh threads into a life that had always been stitched together with failure.

Whoever said that habit conquers determination must have lived through a trial like his. He had lost count of how many times he had tried, how many roads toward hope he had walked, and how many brief victories had filled him with joy before everything inevitably dragged him back to the same place.

To his credit, he had never surrendered to despair like a fatal disease. He confronted himself brutally, fighting the flaws that had become part of his identity. But after every attempt—no matter how long it lasted—he always found himself back at the beginning.

He grew weary.

Weary of struggling in a world whose demands he simply couldn't keep up with. Weary of chasing dreams that reality had no intention of granting him.

Yes...

He was careless. He no longer denied it. But he had tried.

And now...

He no longer cared what people thought of him. At least no one could ever call him a coward. He had chosen, of his own free will, the hardest road. And he possessed enough courage to end the miserable play of his existence with a finale worthy of the audience that had watched his failures with such fascination for so long.

His feet trembled atop the chair, and his heart lurched in response. Thoughts surged violently through his mind. He wondered desperately if there might still be another path toward a better life. True, he had lost his fiancée—but perhaps he could find love again. True, he had failed at every job he had ever tried—but real success often came late. Why not grant himself one more reprieve? One more chance to atone for his mistakes, reconcile with himself and with the world, and perhaps discover a way out of the maze of his failures?

He slipped his head out of the noose. His heart pounded furiously as he stared at the rope swaying gently before his eyes. Without thinking, he touched his neck. He climbed down from the chair, but his legs betrayed him. They could no longer support his weight, and he collapsed onto the edge of the bed, trembling.

Burying his face in his hands, he wondered whether he should abandon his decision. He no longer knew. His thoughts were driving him to the brink of madness. Life was beautiful, yes—but it did not seem meant for him. Suicide was an escape; he did not deny it. Yet the alternative was to wake every morning cursing his luck, only to return each night and lick his wounds. He no longer possessed the strength to endure another defeat.

No...

He would not hesitate this time.

He drew a deep breath, opened his eyes, hurried back to the chair, and climbed onto it. He grasped the rope for a few seconds before tightening the noose around his neck once more. He would not allow himself the comfort of false hope. He refused to return only to play the role of a contented man in a life worthy of pity.

His heart was still racing. He needed to calm himself before the final moment. He wanted to leave this world with at least a trace of the peace he had so rarely known—to depart in tranquility after spending his entire life trembling before everything around him.

His legs quivered again, causing the chair to wobble. The rope tightened around his throat. His heartbeat accelerated, and he exhaled in rapid bursts. He looked down. The floor seemed impossibly far away.

Only one final step remained.

One step, and he would surrender his body to the void and his fate to destiny. One step, and his entire past would lose all meaning.

He lifted his eyes toward the heavens.

They say that those on the verge of death see the story of their lives unfold before them. He smiled bitterly. The last thing he wished to see before dying was the miserable story of his own life. In a few seconds, it would all be over anyway.

He held his breath and slowly moved his foot toward the edge of the chair.

A tear surprised him as it rolled down his cheek—he who had never been one to cry, no matter how great the pain. Yet now he stood on the edge of something greater than his ability to pretend courage.

Had he been wrong? Had he acted too hastily, as he always did, chasing an easy escape from temporary burdens?

And his mother...

Had he been selfish to make this decision without thinking what would become of her? She had leaned on him as one leans on a cane through life's hardships, and now he was about to let her fall before her time.

And his fiancée...

How could he abandon her so easily? He had waited a lifetime for love, prayed endlessly that it would find him, only to flee from it after the very first battle.

And those people ...

Why had he allowed a handful of foolish tongues to judge his life and drive it recklessly toward this abyss—a fate that had never once crossed his mind, not even in his darkest nightmares?

No.

He would not allow himself such a shameful retreat before an illusion that had taken hold of him. His confidence in his ability to overcome failure was still alive despite everything he had endured. He would not end his life with yet another failure for others to mock.

He believed there was still something better waiting for him. He could feel the blood of determination coursing through his veins. His strength had not yet been exhausted.

He would return to life with greater resolve. He would fight the world for the woman he loved.

And his mother...

How beautiful her embrace was.

He would prove that her faith in him had never been misplaced. He would not wound the heart that had carried all his sorrows by adding one grief too heavy for it to bear.

He began to step down from the chair, his hand reaching for the noose that had tightened around his neck.

At that very instant, his body jolted.

The ground beneath him seemed to shudder. He heard the sound of something breaking. Before he could even look down, the chair lurched violently beneath his weight.

It shattered with a dull crack.

His body dropped, swinging helplessly in the empty air.

His legs kicked wildly, searching in vain for something solid beneath them. The rope tightened even further around his throat. Air burst from his lungs in frantic gasps. Blood rushed into his eyes until they burned crimson. His face quickly darkened.

He kicked harder, but every desperate movement only drove the coarse rope deeper into his windpipe.

He reached for the rope with weakening hands. His strength was already leaving him. He tried to scream.

No sound came.

Within moments, the images of his life flooded his mind.

Only then did he truly realize...

that this was the end.

Yet he still fought it.

His senses grew strangely heavy. The sounds around him faded away. The images blurred, dissolving into nothing. The light slowly withdrew from before his eyes. His resistance ebbed.

He was suffocating.

A violent tremor seized his body. His limbs convulsed uncontrollably.

And... slowly...

he slipped into another world he had never known.

At that moment, of all the memories rushing through his mind, one alone lingered.

He did not know why.

The last thing he remembered was his mother's face in his room during a brief conversation they had shared—perhaps two or three days earlier. He could no longer recall exactly when, but he remembered her words with perfect clarity as she leaned close before leaving and whispered:

"Don't forget to fix the little chair. One of its legs looks broken."

But, as always, he had neglected it.

He had put it off, too lazy to bother.

His eyes drifted toward the shattered chair beneath him.

A faint, bitter smile crossed his face as the blood surged to his head.

He closed his eyes—this time in complete surrender—

and, at last,

stopped struggling,

letting his body yield to the empty air.

A photo

Despite the promotion, his office had hardly changed. He welcomed us warmly, and we spent several minutes chatting about one thing after another before I heard a light knock at the door. Mahmoud seemed not to notice it and continued speaking without interruption. A few seconds later, the knocking came again. Only then did I realize, for the first time, that my friend was hard of hearing. I turned to point out that someone was probably asking to come in, but he merely waved a dismissive hand and kept talking.

When the same gentle knock interrupted us for a third time, I finally stood and opened the door. The corridor outside was completely empty. No one was there. Mahmoud calmly took out a pack of cigarettes, lit one, and leaned back in his chair.

"Where did the visitor go?" I asked.

He exhaled a thin stream of smoke and answered without concern. "Forget about it. It was probably Fathy, the office attendant. That's his distinctive knock."

Our other friend laughed. "So, he has a habit of knocking and running away like a mischievous child?"

"Maybe he got bored and left," Mahmoud replied with a shrug. "Or maybe he's annoyed because, as usual, I ignored him. Don't worry. He'll come back later... and I still won't open the door."

I stared at him in surprise.

"So you ignore him on purpose? Why?"

He smiled faintly. "That's a long story."

"Which means," I said, "it's probably worth hearing."

He sighed in resignation before finally saying, All right. But I warned you—it isn't an interesting story."

He stubbed out his cigarette and began.

"Uncle Fathy was the oldest employee at the magazine. He had been there since the very first day we founded it—the unsung hero, as they say. Always energetic, never

resting, never standing still. He wasn't just the office attendant. He was also the janitor, the security guard, and, when necessary, even the secretary. In those early days, the magazine wasn't well known, and our budget was painfully small, so he happily filled every role that needed filling.

He always arrived before anyone else. First, he'd clean the offices, then head to the kitchen. By the time the kettle began to boil, the editors would start arriving. The rest of his day passed making tea and coffee, greeting visitors, directing them to the right offices, fixing whatever happened to break, and answering the telephone whenever our only secretary was busy—or, more often than not, late. He was the very first person I met when I joined the magazine as a rookie editor.

We used to envy his remarkable memory. He never forgot a single habit. Every morning at exactly eight, he'd place my usual cup of coffee on my desk. Precisely two hours later, without my ever asking, a second cup would appear because he'd memorized my routine so perfectly. His timing was so accurate you could have set your watch by him.

As the magazine gradually became more successful and our editorial staff expanded, we hired a cleaning lady for the afternoons, allowing Fathy to devote himself entirely to his work as office attendant.

I still remember the day our very first issue was published. I handed him a copy, and he carefully tucked it away in a special drawer in the kitchen. Though he couldn't read, he would spend long moments studying the photographs with genuine fascination. Whenever work slowed down, he'd take the magazine out, slowly turn the pages in search of pictures, linger over each one, then drift quietly into his own thoughts. Before long, he began asking me for a copy of every issue we published simply so he could look at the photographs. I never understood that peculiar hobby, but he pursued it with childlike enthusiasm.

Three years after I joined the magazine, I was promoted to senior editor. By then, Fathy and I had grown surprisingly close, largely because he often stayed late with me while I finished overdue work. Whenever exhaustion overtook me, he'd sit beside me to keep me company, passing the time by telling stories from his life.

One morning I'll never forget, he knocked softly on my office door, just as he always did. I was absorbed in writing an article and never looked up from my papers. Rather than interrupt me, he simply stood in front of my desk and waited in silence until I finished. When I finally looked up, he smiled shyly. I removed my glasses, rubbed

my tired eyes, and asked why he'd been standing there so quietly. After a brief hesitation, he admitted that he wanted to ask me for a personal favor."

At first, I assumed he wanted to borrow money, though he'd never asked me for anything before. I smiled encouragingly. He lowered his eyes to the floor, and his voice trembled ever so slightly.

"I want to ask you a favor I'll never forget for the rest of my life."

He paused, swallowed hard, then added with an embarrassed smile,

"I want you to publish my picture in the magazine."

I struggled not to laugh. Had you seen the innocent, almost childlike expression on his face, you would have laughed too. His features carried a disarming blend of sincerity and solemn conviction. Smiling gently, I asked,

"Why do you want your picture published?"

His answer was almost painfully naïve. He told me he loved photographs and dreamed of seeing even the smallest picture of himself in the magazine so he could show it proudly to his friends, then keep the issue forever as a treasured memento.

I didn't have the heart to tell him how impossible that sounded. Realistically, the only guaranteed way his photograph would ever appear in the magazine was—many years from now—in the obituary section.

He watched me expectantly, waiting for my answer. I shifted uneasily in my chair and genuinely tried to think of a solution. Simple as his request seemed, there was nowhere I could reasonably publish his photograph. The front pages belonged to politics, something he neither understood nor cared about. The society pages featured celebrities and public figures. The sports section was equally hopeless; the only sport he practiced was riding his old bicycle to work each morning.

Perhaps the crime section? But he'd never done anything remotely newsworthy. The closest he'd ever come to wrongdoing, he once confessed with great embarrassment, was smoking a single cigarette in his youth after being pressured by friends—only to quit forever immediately afterward.

I couldn't think of any solution.

Not wanting to reject him outright and hurt his feelings, I promised I'd think about it. His face lit up with delight, and he left my office almost floating with happiness.

Naturally, the next issue appeared without his photograph.

When he returned, the disappointment on his face was unmistakable. I felt genuinely sorry for him. Unable to invent an excuse he would believe, I gently explained the truth. There had to be a legitimate reason to publish someone's photograph. A person had to be famous, involved in a matter of public interest, or have experienced something extraordinary that readers would want to know about.

When I finished, Fathy fell silent for a few moments. Then he smiled with complete innocence and said,

"Then publish the story of my life."

That time, I couldn't help laughing. He seemed to mistake my laughter for approval because he immediately launched into the story of his life, recounting every detail with great enthusiasm. I quickly realized there was no point trying to stop him. Resigned, I leaned back in my chair, rested my head on one hand, and listened patiently to a story I'd already heard at least ten times before.

Then an idea occurred to me. Why not write a short story inspired by his life and publish it in the magazine's literature section? At the very least, he'd be thrilled to see a story written about him, and perhaps he'd finally stop asking about the photograph. So I began listening more carefully, searching for something worth building a story around.

To my disappointment, I found nothing.

His life was painfully ordinary—a perfect example of routine existence. Flat, featureless, without a single unexpected turn. His father had been a humble postman. His mother died when he was still a child. He never learned to read or write. He spent years working as a shop assistant until the owner died and the business closed. After that he became a waiter in a neighborhood café, disliked the job, drifted through several other menial occupations, and eventually found his place at the magazine.

His days never changed. Every morning he came to work. Every evening he finished his shift, stopped by the neighborhood café to spend an hour or two with a few friends, then returned to his modest home to sleep until morning. Only on Thursday

evenings did he stay at the café a little longer, and every now and then he visited an elderly relative who lived in another town. That was his entire life, almost without omission—a life running on fixed rails like a railway track. Every day he stopped at the same stations before arriving, unfailingly, at exactly the same destination.

How could anyone turn a life like that into a compelling story? There were no dramatic events, no extraordinary experiences, not even a memorable misfortune. It was the sort of life that would frustrate any writer trying to shape it into fiction.

I interrupted my friend.

"But every life contains a story worth telling. Isn't that what writers always say?"

He smiled and slowly shook his head.

"That's a beautiful theory," he said, "but it doesn't apply to everyone—and Uncle Fathy is one of the exceptions. What could I possibly write about? He wakes up, comes to work, goes home, and sleeps. Even his dreams are modest. He has no great ambitions apart from seeing his photograph in the magazine. He never even dreamed of marrying or having children because he knew he couldn't afford either. His greatest ambition is simply to keep his job. No adventures. No grand hopes. Not even a personal project he's trying to achieve."

He paused before asking quietly,

"Who would want to read a story like that?"

In any case, I promised him I would think about it again. I decided to leave the matter alone for a few days, hoping he would eventually forget. But as time passed, his determination only grew stronger. When the next issue appeared without his photograph, he came to reproach me. For the first time, I caught a glimpse of defeat in his eyes. I had never seen him look so disappointed.

A few weeks later, after another issue was published, he walked into my office carrying a tray of coffee in one hand and a copy of the magazine in the other. He opened it in front of me and pointed accusingly to two photographs of ordinary-looking men. Neither appeared to be famous nor particularly important. He asked, with unmistakable hurt in his voice, why their pictures had been published while his never was.

I calmly took the magazine from him. The first man was suffering from a serious illness, and we had published an appeal urging the Minister of Health to approve treatment abroad, accompanied by his photograph. The second had been the victim of a fraud scheme, and we had published his story—along with his picture—to warn readers against similar scams. I explained all this as gently as I could, but he remained unconvinced. If only he had been able to read, I could simply have handed him the magazine and let him discover the truth for himself. Instead, he walked away wearing an expression of quiet suspicion that stayed with me long afterward.

Even as the years passed and I continued avoiding the subject, he never abandoned hope. Later, I discovered that he had approached several other journalists in the magazine with the same request. Unfortunately, they had only laughed at him.

The years transformed our magazine. It was confiscated and shut down several times. Editors came and went. We expanded, renovated the offices, replaced the furniture, and grew from a monthly publication into a weekly one. Everything changed.

Everything...

Except Uncle Fathy.

He never stopped reminding me of his dream. Every so often, he would gently ask about his photograph again, still believing that one day I would finally keep my promise.

Then, one morning...

He didn't come to work.

For the first time in twelve years, his chair remained empty. He had never missed a single day before. He was always the first person to arrive at the office and the last to leave. Over time, he had become such a familiar part of the place that it was difficult to imagine the magazine without him.

When he failed to appear for a second consecutive day, we sent someone to check on him. We learned that he had fallen seriously ill with pneumonia and had been admitted to the hospital. Uncle Fathy had always been physically frail, yet remarkably healthy. It almost seemed as though nature had compensated for his slight frame with extraordinary resilience. But this time, that resilience had suddenly failed him.

Several editors visited him in the hospital. I intended to join them, but I was forced to travel to cover an important conference. One of my colleagues later called to tell me that Uncle Fathy had asked about me specifically and had hoped to see me. I promised myself I would visit as soon as I returned.

I never had the chance.

He died only a few days later.

He had no close family in the city, so the magazine arranged everything. He was buried in a modest public cemetery. And, as though fate wished to deny him every final kindness, our newspaper was confiscated once again after publishing an investigation into a major legal case despite a publication ban ordered by the Public Prosecutor. By the time we resumed printing, it was too late even to publish an obituary in his memory.

It has now been a year since his death. I have become editor-in-chief, and a new office attendant has taken his place.

That is the whole story.

As you can see...

It hardly seemed worthy of becoming either a feature article...

or a story.

I looked at him in astonishment.

"Then why did you assume it was him knocking?"

Mahmoud took a slow sip of his coffee before answering, as though a forgotten memory had just resurfaced.

"I forgot to tell you something. A few days after Uncle Fathy died, strange things began happening around the office. People heard noises coming from the kitchen, even though no one was there. The new office attendant swears he hears the sound of desks being cleaned every morning before anyone arrives, but whenever he goes to investigate, he finds every office empty. Even the building's doorman insists he sometimes sees lights burning late into the evening in the rooms where Uncle Fathy

used to stay behind with editors finishing their work... even though no one stays that late anymore.

"And then there were the knocks.

"They always came at the exact times Uncle Fathy used to bring me my coffee. The same gentle, unmistakable knock you heard a few minutes ago. Whenever I opened the door... no one was there. Several of the older editors have experienced the very same thing.

"And the strangest part..." He paused briefly.

"Uncle Fathy kept a collection of old issues in a special drawer in the kitchen—especially those filled with photographs, including the magazine's very first issue. The new office attendant saw them there on his first day... but afterward they simply vanished. No one ever found them. Around the same time, the glass covering several framed photographs hanging on the walls shattered for no apparent reason. Eventually, we stopped hanging photographs altogether."

Silence settled heavily over the room.

After glancing at his watch, Mahmoud stood up.

"It's getting late," he said with a smile. "Lunch is on me today. We should celebrate the promotion."

We left the office together without another word.

My mind was still turning over everything he had told us. The corridor outside was almost deserted. Most of the editors had already gone to lunch—or left for the day altogether. Only the echo of our footsteps accompanied us.

As we approached the kitchen...

I suddenly stopped.

A sound drifted out from inside. Mahmoud continued walking as though nothing were unusual, forcing me to follow. The closer we came, the clearer the sounds became.

Water was boiling.

Someone...

or something...

seemed to be making tea.

At the same time, I heard the unmistakable rustle of magazine pages being turned. Mahmoud pointed casually toward a chair beside the doorway.

"That's where Uncle Fathy used to sit while waiting for someone to call him. And that door over there leads to the storage room."

He kept talking.

I barely heard a word. My attention was fixed entirely on the kitchen. The moment we reached the doorway, I slowly turned my head and stole a glance inside.

No one.

The kitchen was completely empty.

And the sounds stopped...

the very instant we passed the entrance.

A cold shiver ran down my spine. Then, the moment we moved beyond the doorway...

the sounds began again.

Clearer than before.

I forced myself to keep walking, though every instinct urged me to turn around. Mahmoud's voice finally pulled me back to the present.

"Whenever I think of Uncle Fathy," he said quietly, "I can't help feeling sorry for him. I've tried so many times to write something about his life... but even now I still can't find a single remarkable thing to write about."

He sighed and spread his hands helplessly.

"I only wish I could find something—anything—extraordinary about him ... I'd write about him immediately."

Table of Contents

The Criminal 1

Prepared 8

The Alley 14

The Circle of Thieves 21

Birthday Party 29

The Informant 38

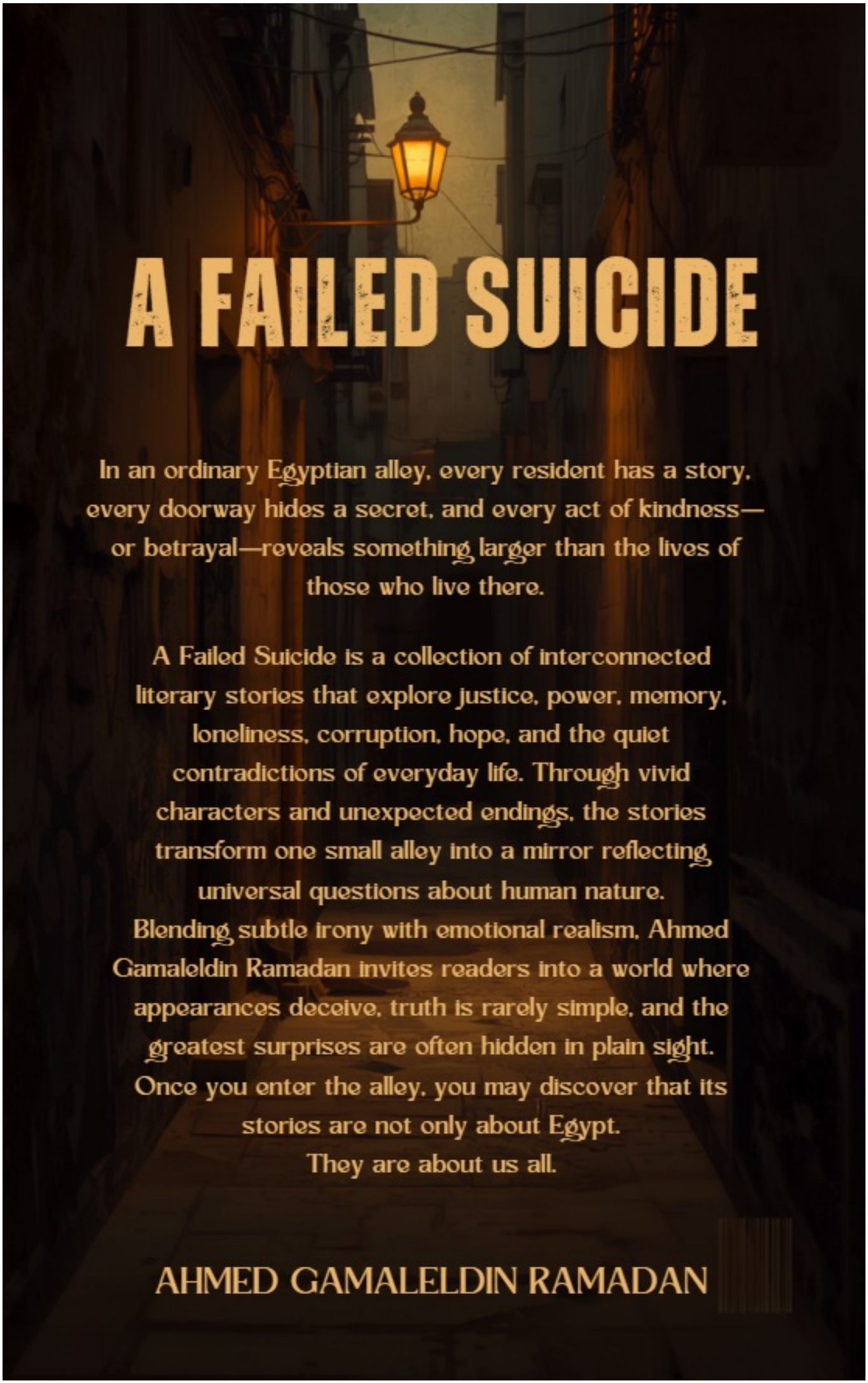
The Monster 49

The Role 61

The Car 72

A Failed Suicide 82

A Photo 89



A FAILED SUICIDE

In an ordinary Egyptian alley, every resident has a story, every doorway hides a secret, and every act of kindness—or betrayal—reveals something larger than the lives of those who live there.

A Failed Suicide is a collection of interconnected literary stories that explore justice, power, memory, loneliness, corruption, hope, and the quiet contradictions of everyday life. Through vivid characters and unexpected endings, the stories transform one small alley into a mirror reflecting universal questions about human nature.
Blending subtle irony with emotional realism, Ahmed Gamaleldin Ramadan invites readers into a world where appearances deceive, truth is rarely simple, and the greatest surprises are often hidden in plain sight.
Once you enter the alley, you may discover that its stories are not only about Egypt.
They are about us all.

AHMED GAMALELDIN RAMADAN